

**INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

**THE UNDERSTANDING OF DISCIPLESHIP IN A POSTMODERN  
WORLD**

By

**Esther Mbango Ngoutte**

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the

International Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Theology

Los Angeles, California

June 2023

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**Dissertation Approval**

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Chairman: \_\_\_\_\_

Member: \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Dean: \_\_\_\_\_

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## ABSTRACT

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The concept of Christian discipleship has faced transformative challenges in the ever-evolving landscape of the postmodern world. As societies have shifted away from modernity's certainties and embraced relativism, individualism, and pluralism, the traditional paradigms of discipleship have been profoundly impacted. This work explores the essential elements and implications of Christian discipleship in a postmodern context emphasizing the need of clearing up the different assumptions we had.

In the postmodern era, Christian discipleship faces a myriad of challenges, including skepticism towards absolute truth claims, relativism diluting the uniqueness of Christian beliefs, and the rise of secular humanism leading to the marginalization of religious values. Consequently, a new approach to discipleship must emerge, one that acknowledges the diverse perspectives and encourages critical thinking while maintaining the core principles of the Biblical faith. In navigating this complex landscape, Christian discipleship must prioritize a renewed emphasis on following Jesus and living in the community as a disciple. Furthermore, Christian discipleship in a postmodern context demands a holistic integration of Biblical faith into all aspects of life. A comprehensive approach to discipleship encourages individuals to live out their faith in every context. In so doing, Christian discipleship offers a compelling alternative to the

prevailing postmodern narratives and demonstrates the enduring relevance and transformative power of their faith in an ever-changing world.

Mentor: Dr. Mel Loucks

Word Count: 216

## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE DISCLAIMER**

As a non-native speaker of English, I am aware that my writing may at times lack clarity, though I have attempted to write as clearly as possible. Please note that the primary purpose of this work is to acknowledge a theory and to apply it to a particular context. I appreciate the editorial assistance I have received from various individuals, but acknowledge that the responsibility for this work is entirely my own.

## **DEDICATION**

To My Father

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First and foremost, I want to thank our heavenly Father who gave me strength, good health, and grace throughout this journey. Glory, Honor, and majesty to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in whom we live, move, and have our being.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the birth of postmodernity, a subject that is increasingly discussed in Christian circles because of its impact on the context of the church. Scholars are widely divided about the definition of postmodernism and its potential contribution to furthering the kingdom of God on earth. The apologist Douglas Groothuis in his book, Truth Decay, rightly said, “Those who are receptive to postmodernist ideas believe that Christian theology should embrace a new model more in accord with postmodern thinking; others less radical, take postmodernism as a generally helpful development that can open theology to new avenues of thought and relevance.”<sup>1</sup>

Generally, the position of scholars and writers of postmodernism seems to indicate their theological understanding or position, whether conservative or liberal. Another observation is related to the topic of discipleship which is losing its importance in our postmodern society. Local churches make converts and few to no disciples at all. This can be explained by the fact that society has changed, faith has become extremely fragile, and many converted Christians struggling with the constant pressure of skeptical friends and counter-perspectives. The people who represent the hierarchical leaders of most societies are not those who promote Christian values. Therefore, questions arise for Christians who move in different circles about their choices, their beliefs, and their desire to make a difference. Matthew 28:19 says “Therefore go and make disciples of all

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000). 111.

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” There is a need for the local church to emphasize the great commission so that the church can remain relevant even in this postmodern culture.

The reason, therefore, for this thesis is to explore biblical and theological facts around the theme of discipleship in the postmodern world and to define strategies that will be helpful not only in the field of academia and research but also for Christian ministry in fulfilling the great commission.

The basic tenets of postmodernism assume the absence of objective truth, the relativity of moral values, and that reality is socially constructed. This understanding has become an ideological challenge; no truth-oriented religious structure or meta-theory is allowed to be incorporated into society. The postmodern emphasis on feelings and a sense of absolute existential openness is detrimental to society, which cannot last without defining clear, attainable, and objective goals. The relevance of this study is timely because it deals with the current situation society is facing: the problem of truth, which has an immediate and direct influence on discipleship in our local churches.

Additionally, the theme of discipleship is pivotal because as the primary aspect of this study, the researcher is committed to exposing the epistemological problem by presenting the biblical notion of truth in comparison to the alternative concepts of the world. This will pave the path for how Christian and Biblical discipleship must be undertaken as Christians while navigating in the postmodern era.

### ***1.1. Statement of the Problem***

Christianity provided the West's dominant religious and social structure, impacting almost every aspect of life. Christian beliefs in general were not foreign; in fact, they determined the moral conduct of Western society. Although not everybody

agreed on all the details, the vast majority acknowledged the divine commandment to love God with all your heart, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. In the past, preaching about Hell and Heaven caused people to repent and follow Christ; but today, such preaching will not be as effective. Traditionally, people were educated within a basic Christian framework- “a Christian view of God, of soul and body, of heaven and hell, of rewards and punishments of the ten commandments and the sermon on the mount”.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of evangelism, in those days, was to awaken people to the truth they heard and then lead them to follow and put into practice the Word that was preached. In today’s world, there is a complete paradigm shift; religious beliefs are presented as constructed products of the human mind that are constantly evolving. As such, the cultural context in which the church finds itself is in direct contra-distinction to its position in the past. There is a clear rejection of God in the lifestyle of those who are navigating in the postmodern culture.

The cultural narrative that we see and hear is constantly changing. The Christian narrative is heavily contested and often deconstructed to the point of being rendered meaningless. The paradigmatic shift from Christian beliefs to something that is undefined and open-ended is starting to re-navigate many countries of the majority world; and if nothing is done, if an effective response is not presented, the results of this worldly philosophy could be disastrous.

With this understanding, we realize that our societies having become more secularized are now social spaces in which Christian beliefs are not evident for everybody as it used to be. Moreover, the existence of religious pluralism in our societies has become a norm even though this is not the first time the church finds itself in a

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<sup>2</sup> John Piper and Justin Taylor, *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 105.

pluralistic society.<sup>3</sup> The approach used by the early church has to be contextualized for today because so much has changed.

On the other hand, there is a growing number of people who consider Christianity as authoritative and oppressive, as a community that forces its beliefs on others. The claim that Christianity is the only way is considered exclusive and intolerant given the fact that the two principles that rule the postmodern movement are the principle of tolerance and the principle of choice. It is highly problematic when society does not see Christianity as a force for good and vital for its existence. It is therefore “central to our task, to learn how to help others to see the splendor of God and his purposes by reimagining the world through the Christian story.”<sup>4</sup>

Postmodernism poses a real challenge to Christian discipleship. The church in the modern era could easily define itself against the modern mindset, but with the postmodern mind, the same distinctions are not so evident. There is a completely different way of thinking. Religion is seen as a preference or a choice and discussions about Christianity are seen as based on specific inclinations. These preferences are discussed in similar ways to how people talk about things they like or dislike in terms of food, architecture and hosts of other topics. Faith is reduced to personal preference that picks out the Bible passages we like or the churches we prefer at the expense of the other passages of the Bible that we do not like. That is the reason many pastors will not preach about “Hell” or other important topics that don’t make people feel good.

Discipleship will not take place in settings where people chose to believe what they like and disregard parts of the Bible they dislike. It is highly problematic because the Christian faith is not sustained by personal preference but is rather based on the Word of God, which is the truth.

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua D. Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 11.

## 1.2. Thesis

This study deals with the problem of understanding the cultural context of sharing the Gospel in a postmodern / post-Christian world. “The cultural narratives that seep into our psyches have changed as well. The basic categories assumed in the Christian story are no longer taken for granted. And in many cases, this gospel story is presumed to not only be false, but an oppressive leftover from the past”.<sup>5</sup> We cannot assume that everybody understands the truth of the gospel story in a society where values and morals have shifted. The massive Christian evangelistic efforts that we still have in the majority world are continuing to draw people to Christ, unlike the West, where such a strategy would be ineffective. Accordingly, there is a real need for a new approach to sharing the gospel of Christ. Even as the Christian story has been categorized as oppressive and unloving, we need to explore the reasons behind these negative attitudes and find ways to establish the Truth in a manner that can bring many to the discipleship of Jesus Christ.

In the book of Acts, Chapter 17, Paul reasoned with the people of Athens and stressed the fact that they are very religious because of the many objects of worship that were in the city. Talking about the Unknown God, he stressed the fact that they were ignorant of the very object they worshipped. This passage provides a parallel to the cultural and religious context of our own contemporary generation. Our generation does not look, per se, for a physical object of worship, but there is a quest for truth that would situate us meaningfully on this earth. The error in thinking has been to identify the truth within us making us the centers of our own following. But how do we know that this internal truth is actually the Truth? The problem becomes epistemological in nature. As such, we will challenge the thinking of our generation which resists Christianity because of the claim to Truth in the world which has inevitably become post-truth.

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<sup>5</sup> Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 1.

So, this study aims to clarify and proclaim the truth of the gospel in a postmodern / post-Christian world and to show ways of discipleship that are appealing to the cultural and religious context of this generation.

### ***1.3. Research Method***

The methodology of research for this thesis will be a qualitative phenomenological study. This method allows the researcher to bring personal values into the study and studies the cultural and religious context of the phenomenon. The library research will be the primary method used in this thesis because it will give us a specific understanding of the postmodern ethos and its effects and help us draw conclusions based on the existing literature.

### ***1.4. Limitations of the Study***

This thesis is limited to the understanding of the religious aspect of postmodernism and its effects in the cultural and religious context of the West. The emphasis will be made on Christian and biblical discipleship from a general perspective and introductory postmodern evangelism.

Keywords that will be used throughout the thesis are Believer, Disciple, Discipleship, Ethos, worldview, Evangelism, Meta-narratives, Modernism, Postmodern, Postmodernist, Postmodernism, and Postmodernism.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **OVERVIEW OF POSTMODERNISM AND DISCIPLESHIP**

#### **PART 1: POSTMODERNISM**

The term “postmodernism” first entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979, with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean-François Lyotard.<sup>6</sup> In his book of the same title, Jean-Francois Lyotard addresses the cultural and intellectual shift of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from modernity to postmodernity. For him, the postmodern condition refers to a state of society, a response to the failures of modernity, particularly the shift away from modernity’s grand narratives towards a fragmented and pluralistic view of knowledge and truth. Besides Jean-Francois Lyotard, there are other French philosophers like Jacques Derrida with his theory of Deconstruction, and Michel Foucault. These three are the post-structuralists who promoted postmodernism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are always cited whenever postmodernism is discussed.

For this chapter, we will focus on giving an overview of the three different eras and discuss how postmodernism affected every sphere of society.

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<sup>6</sup> Gary Aylesworth, “Postmodernism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2015 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2015), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism/>.

### ***2.1. Overview of the Premodern Period to the Postmodern Period***

Modernism gave rise to postmodernism; thus, it is crucial to comprehend the traits of the modern mindset in order to fully appreciate the traits of the modern era, which spanned several centuries before the advent of postmodernity. In a similar manner, modernism developed from premodern thought, which persisted for many centuries before giving way to the demands of a new period. The premodern period, particularly, the medieval, was identified by the feudal system of government. The Church dominated people's lives because it was regarded as the main source of instruction and salvation. It regarded the Pope as the supreme authority and exercised great political influence over the ruling classes. "The religious authorities set the content of the faith, its dogma and doctrines, and the proper interpretation of scripture. In this, they depended on the Bible, reason, and tradition of councils and church fathers."<sup>7</sup> People could show their religious life through baptism, the Eucharist, public prayer, and worship. They have faith in the leaders of the church, there was not any questioning of faith, and there was no means of questioning because most of the peasants could not read or write. The teachings and rulings of the lords and kings were accepted, and the Church had control over the people. Nobody could contradict the beliefs of the Church because the Church was always right. Thus, they went along with its teachings.

The church was supported by tithes; everybody was mandated by law to pay tithes, but most of the peasants were poor, and their tithes did not amount to much. The general population was answerable to the priest, the priest to the bishop, and the bishop to the Pope of Rome."<sup>8</sup> The Pope was the final authority of the church. Nobody could question his authority; he could depose emperors, translate a bishop in another diocese,

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<sup>7</sup> Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for The Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006), 25

<sup>8</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 24.

and depose or reconcile bishops.<sup>9</sup> In the feudal system, the political structure placed power with lords and nobles. Lands were owned by lords of the manors and lords and the peasants (poor people) were subjects. An individual's economic and social privileges in society were determined at birth. The lords were in control of the feudal food chain. The population during this period was generally subjected to the rule of monarchs or other ruling authorities, with limited political freedoms.

However, there were also times when the Church and the government were at odds with one another. Also, educated people were part of the clergy and the traditional authorities. This was the reason why they discouraged the reading of the Bible among laypeople because they lacked education and proper understanding of the faith to interpret it correctly. The educational system was centered on an in-depth comprehension of a few canonical texts, particularly the Bible, the works of the church fathers, and the writings of a few ancient pagans, especially Aristotle. This model of education was based on the knowledge and comprehension of ancient roots because it was assumed that the first authors and writers produced a great amount of work that was fundamentally important. The task therefore for any new generation is to reclaim the work of the first authors, comprehend and interpret it, then pass it on. The way this was carried out by the clergy was through the process called *Lectio Divina* or divine reading. This would eventually lead the reader into a deeper spirituality, a devotional rumination over the Bible passages. Scholars, on the other hand, interpreted authoritative texts using techniques of rational argument, with the aim of greater knowledge.”<sup>10</sup>

The freedoms we dearly value and celebrate today were non-existent for the average person who could not make his own choice. Human rights as a concept did not

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<sup>9</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 405.

<sup>10</sup> White, *Postmodernism* 101, 25.

exist; individuals have rights and obligations based on birth status (serfs versus lords); different groups are seen almost as different species. The only authorized religion was the Catholic Church and thus it decided on matters concerning society and Christian life.

The feudal system of governance did not allow people to think critically, moreover, it served the best interests of the powerful. It has always been perceived by most people that in the premodern days, reason was nonexistent. Reason was present and it was viewed with the protestant scholasticism, but faith supersedes reason in the medieval. A good parallel would have been to talk about how the church and the government worked together to make sure that people followed the law, it was the time of church and state, called Christendom. As long as the Church had the support of the state, everything went well. With the reformation, reason was elevated to equality with the faith.

Just as every system has its own limitations, a change disrupted the feudal system. The authorities came under increasing religious, economic, scientific, and political pressures. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western Europe underwent major transitions that consistently changed the church and politics.

The religious aspect of the questioning of the Church's authority came with the Protestant Reformation. It was one of the major movements that gave way to modern thought in the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They were various reasons for the Protestant Reformation, religious, economic, and political. The Protestant Reformation officially began in 1517 when Martin Luther challenged the Roman Catholic Church on the matter of indulgences. This shows the corruption of the papacy, the decline of monasticism and scholastic theology, and the rise of mysticism. Luther pointed out the truth that good works cannot save our souls, but that justification is by faith alone; thus, his doctrine of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone. Luther and other reformers turned to the Bible as the only reliable source of instruction as opposed to the teachings of the Church and the

doctrine of *sola scriptura*, that scripture was the sole ultimate authority for the Christian life. The invention of the printing press, together with the translation of the Bible into the vernacular made the bible available for all those who could read without having to rely on the clergy.

Under the doctrine of Scripture alone, the Bible remained the only authoritative book of instruction; moreover, it gave room for critical thinkers to question its claims. By so doing, the modern period witnessed the birth of Unitarianism, a movement that rejects the doctrine of the Trinity, then Deism, a movement that conflicted with orthodox Christian teaching. “Deists accepted revelation only insofar as it could be reconciled with reason, which ruled out miracles, the efficacy of prayer, and many other orthodox aspects of Christianity.”<sup>11</sup>

Many other movements followed that conflicted with orthodoxy.

The modern movement in many aspects challenged traditional Christianity. James Byrne, a senior lecturer in theology, in his book *Religion and Enlightenment*, describes several characteristics and features of modernity stemming from the Enlightenment<sup>12</sup>:

- An emphasis on the power of reason to discover the truth about humanity and the world.
- Skepticism about the venerable institutions and traditions of the past.
- The emergence of the scientific way of thinking offered intellectuals a viable alternative approach to knowledge from that which had dominated medieval thought.

The Enlightenment was a movement parallel to the modern era. It has been known as the Age of Reason. Modern theology’s view of God is in the light of modernity- the

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<sup>11</sup> White, *Postmodernism* 101, 28.

<sup>12</sup> James M. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 5.

cultural ethos stemming from the Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> It is “theology that seeks to contextualize Christian belief in the culture of modernity- sometimes by rejecting much of it.”<sup>14</sup> Before the Enlightenment and modernity, the church was the principal authority of knowledge. It went from establishing kings to revealing the way of life for people. Christians have believed throughout history that the earth was created by God and that God revealed himself in Jesus Christ, who is the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. They also believed that Jesus Christ is both human and divine; His divine birth, his life, death, and resurrection are part of the essence of Traditional, orthodox, or historical Christianity. They believed Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and that his death at the cross provided salvation and he will return to judge the earth. Christians believed also that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. They also believed in the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They believed that God performs miracles.

Nevertheless, intellectual forces interrogated the validity of traditional society. It was manifested by the scientific revolution and the work of many nationalistic thinkers. Starting with Aristotle (384-322 BC) who believed that the earth was round. He thought the earth was the center of the universe and that the sun, moon, planets, and all fixed stars revolved around it.<sup>15</sup> Among many discoveries, Galileo (1564-1642) proved that the earth revolves around the sun and not the other way around. This came as an attack against the church. He was eventually questioned and sentenced to house arrest on the ground that his teachings contradicted scripture and the teachings of the church.<sup>16</sup> In 1686, Isaac Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*, or *Mathematical Laws* laid the “foundations for the

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<sup>13</sup> Roger E. Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2013), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> “StarChild: Cosmology,” accessed April 1, 2023, [https://starchild.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/StarChild/universe\\_level2/cosmology.html](https://starchild.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/StarChild/universe_level2/cosmology.html).

<sup>16</sup> White, *Postmodernism* 101, 29.

mechanistic worldview that has been so beneficial to science and that challenged much traditional theology insofar as it ruled out miracles.”<sup>17</sup> "He reasoned that all heavenly bodies are constantly moving, with no limits on space and time." ("StarChild: Cosmology - NASA") Newton's discoveries made it difficult to believe in miracles. Not that he came to that conclusion, but his disciples did over the years, more scientific theories were developed among which Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution described in his book "On the Origin of Species" published in 1859. In his book, he describes how organisms evolve over generations through the inheritance of physical or behavioral traits.<sup>18</sup> With all these scientific developments, it was clear that science was very successful. It was considered by many the reservoir of truth, unlike theology was losing ground; especially because of its inability to answer questions related to miracles or the supernatural.

Another significant change that was taking place in society was the philosophers who were convinced about a foundation of knowledge that was different from the Bible. Knowledge was redefined during the Enlightenment and the Modern period by secular minds. Knowledge has come to be defined as what can be proven by secular evidence and arguments. Enlightenment thinkers "thought they had possession of a new knowledge and a new way of knowing which gave them a privileged position to judge the errors of the past and fashion the achievement of the future.”<sup>19</sup>

Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804), an important figure of Enlightenment, in his essay *What is Enlightenment?* rejected the knowledge that was imposed on people by religious and political authorities. He assumed that rational decisions could be made by himself without any other intervention. For him, "the essence of Enlightenment is daring to

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<sup>17</sup> Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 39.

<sup>18</sup> Tom Garner, Ashley P. Taylor, and Ker Than last updated, "What Is Darwin's Theory of Evolution?," *livescience.com*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.livescience.com/474-controversy-evolution-works.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment*, ix.

question and use one's own reasoning ability to decide what to believe."<sup>20</sup> He embraced Descartes's confidence in human reason and invited people to think for themselves. Before Kant, Renee Descartes (1596-1650), a brilliant mathematician and philosopher, who is also known as the "father of modern philosophy" was already thinking for himself, he "was seeking new foundations for truth and a method of discovering the truth that would provide certainty."<sup>21</sup> He reasoned that there was no certainty in all that he learned so far; as a matter of fact, most of what he was taught was untrue. He decided therefore to work toward certainty by doubting everything. In so doing, he concluded that there is one thing he cannot doubt, his existence; thus, the simple thought *cogito ergo sum* - *I think therefore I am*. To think, he needs to exist. Descartes based all knowledge on his own existence rather than God's. Modern thought took another turn from this time on, for all the questions concerning human life that were undoubtedly believed by the majority, came under the scrutiny of philosophers and scientists obsessed with certainty: the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the virgin birth, etc....

Descartes was one of the greatest figures of the launching of modernity. He could have been the bridge between the premodern era and the modern era. He revolutionized ways of thinking and knowing about God. With him, faith and theology were relegated to the second rank, but knowledge became a matter of proving and reasoning as the primary way of knowing. He heavily challenged the traditional view of Christianity.

John Locke, another thinker of the Enlightenment, was the first philosopher to formulate the doctrine of empiricism. In *his An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, of 1690, he argues that "the mind is a tabula rasa on which experiences leave their marks, and therefore denied that humans have innate ideas or that anything is knowable without reference to experience. He argues that some knowledge could be

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<sup>20</sup> Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 47.



arrived at through intuition and reasoning alone.”<sup>22</sup> He proposed another approach to knowledge that counteracted the rationalism of Descartes. Both Descartes and Locke were known as Christians, but they did not give much thought to the revelation part of the Bible. Without rejecting the miracles, the supernatural elements of the Bible, they downplayed them because their faith was centered on the ability of the human mind to answer hard questions. The more they went on reasoning on knowledge, the more the society moved from God-centered life to human-centered life. Science was elevated at the expense of theology. It caused many Christian philosophers to express skepticism toward religion. Reason became the foundation of any true religion.

The modern period witnessed a change in the political sphere. The feudal system maintained kings and religious authorities in power, but the twist with the modern period was with the assumption that “individuals are created by God, and therefore they have rights that cannot be removed by any created entity, such as the state.”<sup>23</sup> The focus moved from the rights of the powerful to the rights of the individuals. Just as God created the powerful and put them in power, He also created the individuals in the society to live in freedom and participate in the wellbeing of the society. Both the *American Declaration of Independence* written in 1776, clearly expresses the exercise of the rights of individuals and *the Statement of Human and Civil Rights* put people in the center of life. Moreover, it was a display of Enlightenment thought. There was therefore a shift of authority from kings and lords, placing it in the hands of common people, thus democracy was born. The government existed to solve social problems. They eventually concluded that for the happiness of a greater number of individuals, governments have to centralize their power in a bureaucracy at the national level.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “Empiricism - By Branch / Doctrine - The Basics of Philosophy,” accessed April 1, 2023, [https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch\\_empiricism.html](https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html).

<sup>23</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 33.

The changes that were observed in society did not spare the church. On a number of levels, the way that worship was conducted in the premodern and modern traditions was different. The Lord's Supper, often known as the Eucharist, is the focal point of any premodern religious liturgy. The believer's interaction with bread and wine was the foundation of the Christian life. The Lord's body is symbolized by the bread, and his blood is symbolized by the wine. Modern humankind was unable to make the connection between bread and flesh. It sounded absurd. The sermon has become the pinnacle of contemporary church worship. In the sermon, the knowledge was being transmitted to the congregation; with that, they could claim a deeper understanding of the scriptures, and spiritual growth was taking place. This openness has been helpful for the modern church in the sense that, it allowed individuals to explore other aspects of Christianity that were foreign so far. The modern era's scientific, philosophical, and economic successes through reason caused Christian theologians to reevaluate Christian doctrine. Overall, modernity advanced society in many aspects but caused a sense of disappointment.

In summary, the modern era believed it had discovered the solutions to life's most pressing problems. It was a time marked by assurance, independence, and hope. No issue was insurmountable. There is no enigma in the universe that cannot be solved. Confidence in human reasoning abilities was at the core of the modern worldview. With the progress that was observed through the scientific and technological revolution, it was expected that societies would be better places to live and evolve in any matter they engaged themselves in. Progress was observed through education, self-confidence, and control of our environment. The modern worldview demonstrated its autonomy by scientifically grasping and technologically controlling and transforming the world impeded by threats such as tradition, ignorance, and superstition. The modern belief that humankind will advance rested on the premise that human reason would be put to good

use and that people were either naturally decent or were at least undergoing positive change.

## ***2.2. Postmodern Critique of Modernity***

The modern era failed to fulfill the promise of the world becoming a better place. The world modern humankind has created is a world of chaos. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed the industrial revolution, slavery, colonization, the two World Wars, the Great Depression, racial strife, Holocaust, and many other life-threatening events. The modern mind was dreaming of a utopia on earth; however, the 20th century proved to be the bloodiest century in human history. Religion did not die as modernity had anticipated. In fact, it grew. Many groups experienced growth. Christianity was put in the back seat of modernity's wagon. Rationalism has not solved the problems of life and has not fostered social well-being. These unfulfilled predictions made it clear that modernism lacked the solution for the enhancement of society; voices started rising against it and gradually gave birth to postmodernism. Frederic Nietzsche predicted that it will be the bloodiest in the Will to power.

The postmodern critique was that “modernism, with its emphasis on reason, insists on resolving and eliminating the differences between people.”<sup>25</sup> The modernist emphasis on rationality and scientific knowledge has led to the exclusion of alternative ways of knowing and understanding the world. With great clarity and self-assurance, the modern period provided humanity with answers about the meaning of life whereby Man is the head of his own destiny, that He can know, understand, and control the world around him. In contrast, the Postmodern response to the basic questions of life was that Humankind is merely part of the mass of humanity, here by chance or accident, no more than the random combination of molecules. Humankind is here for no reason but to take

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<sup>25</sup> White, *Postmodernism* 101, 43.

advantage of its position here on Earth. It concludes that life doesn't matter, nothing matters.

One of the powerful critiques of modernity came from Michel Foucault, a prominent French postmodern philosopher and social theorist is among the leading voices who rejected Enlightenment. He believed that "modern rationality is a coercive force". In his genealogical works of the 1970s, he stigmatizes modern rationality, institutions, and forms of subjectivity as sources or constructs of domination. Where modern theories tend to see knowledge and truth to be neutral, objective, universal, or vehicles of progress and emancipation, Foucault analyzes them as integral components of power and domination."<sup>26</sup> His argument rests on the fact that the modernist project of rationality and progress has been used to justify various forms of dominations and oppression; the creation of prisons, schools, and hospitals was based on a new form of power that sought to control and regulate the bodies and minds of individuals in ways that were previously unthinkable.

In the modern era, Christianity flourished despite the predictions of radical philosophers who thought otherwise. However, Christianity lost its position because of the strong emphasis on rational knowledge. The church doctrines were therefore considered superstitions or opinions because of the lack of supportive evidence for their claims. Christian thinkers thought of bringing responses to the challenges of the time by reconstructing theology. This reconstruction led some to wander from traditional Christianity while others affirmed their faith in the biblical doctrines that were established from the beginning. During the modern time, the world witnessed the rise of pietism, religious individualism, liberalism, theologies of religious experience, scientific study of religion, social gospel, neo-orthodoxy, fundamentalism, modern ecumenism,

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<sup>26</sup> "Postmodern Theory by Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, Chapter 2: Foucault and the Critique of Modernity," 4, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/pomo/ch2.html>.

existentialism, and process theology as part of the Christian theological tradition. On the other side of modernity, the Western historical experience brought the individual freedom that was so lacking in the premodern era to the floor along with other ideologies such as naturalistic reductionism, scientific empiricism, and historical criticism.<sup>27</sup> The modern era rebelled against the wisdom of the premodern by setting its own standard of success. In resisting the rationality of modern thought, Kierkegaard somehow paved the way for postmodernism. He is known as the father of existentialism and advocated for Christian existence in comparison to what he called cheap Christianity which cannot be reduced to a system as modernity had done.<sup>28</sup>

Postmodern thinkers rebelled against modernity for various reasons. While it was said that the modern era is a time of innovation and advancement, the history of modernity shows an increasingly brutal, barbarian, and malignant end of an era. The wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the decline of modernity myths with devastating weaponry developed by modern science and Germany's genocide of Jews, raising questions about the limits and consequences of modernity.

In the theological sphere, many Christian thinkers worked at reconstructing Christianity in the light of modernity so as not to lose ground completely. The reconstruction of Christianity gave rise to different kinds of theologies. Society experienced conservative Protestant theology, neo-orthodoxy, neo-liberal and radical theologies.

The postmodern critique of modernity challenges the idea that there is a single, universal model for understanding and organizing human society. Gene Edward Veith, in his book *The Postmodern Times*, stresses that “the problem with the Enlightenment is not its uncritical dependence upon human reason alone, but its assumption that there is such a

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity...What?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 48–49.

<sup>28</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2: The Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 394–395.

thing as objective truth.”<sup>29</sup> Modernists believe that objective truth is independent of individual perspectives and cultural contexts, and that it can be discovered through a process of systematic inquiry and critical reflection. They argue that this approach to knowledge is superior to other ways of knowing such as intuition, revelation, or tradition, which they see as unreliable and subjective. However, postmodern thinkers argue that the belief in objective truth is problematic, as it ignores the role of the social and cultural context in shaping our understanding of the world. They argue that all knowledge is situated within a particular cultural, historical, and political context, and that is therefore always partial, provisional, and subject to interpretation. It is in that light that David Harvey, another author who wrote about Postmodernism, said: “Universal modernism has been identified with the belief in the linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge and production; on the other hand, fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal and totalizing discourses are the hallmark of postmodern thought.”<sup>30</sup> Postmodernism emphasizes the importance of plurality, diversity, and difference, and encourages us to embrace complexity and uncertainty in our understanding of the world.

A paradigm shift in theology occurred in the 1960s and the 1970s due to the rise of postmodernism. Prior to this time, modernity was seen as advantageous, but some religious conservatives had concerns. Theologians were grappling with the epistemological issues raised by modernity, such as whether faith was a valid basis for belief and if both could be grounded in the biblical narrative. Postmodernism, as defined by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on*

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<sup>29</sup> Gene Edward Jr Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, Turning Point Christian Worldview Series (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1994), 42.

<sup>30</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 9.

*Knowledge*, is “incredulity towards meta-narratives.”<sup>31</sup> This means that postmodernists are skeptical of grand narratives or theories that claim to explain all knowledge and experience. This led some marginalized groups, such as minorities and women, to criticize modernity for allowing domination by educated and wealthy people and for not aiding disadvantaged groups. What came out of this was liberation theology. Overall, the main objection postmodern thinkers have against modernity is the “totalizing effect of modernity.”<sup>32</sup>

### **2.3. *Tenets of Postmodernism***

Postmodernism is a philosophical and cultural movement that emerged on the popular level in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a response to modernism. Just as its name indicates, it came after modernity. It is characterized by a rejection of objective truth, an emphasis on subjectivity, a skepticism toward grand narratives or meta-narratives, and a focus on language and discourse. While it has no single definition, it has influenced many fields, including theology, and there have been several theologians who have worked on this ideology, postmodernism. “The term ‘postmodern’ has become a buzzword in contemporary society and is often used loosely to refer to anything that diverges from traditional standards or is relativistic.”<sup>33</sup> John R. Franke, in his essay on ‘The Nature of Theology’, says “Postmodern thought is best understood not primarily as a particular philosophical or social agenda, but as a critique and rejection of the central features of modernity and the attempts to engage in constructive discourse in its aftermath.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). xxiv

<sup>32</sup> Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 652.

<sup>33</sup> David Porteous, “A Christian View of Postmodernism and Its Roots,” n.d., 7.

<sup>34</sup> Myron B. Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), 204.

Many theologians have attempted to define its tenets, from Milliard Erickson to James Sire, R. Scott Smith to Stewart E. Kelly. They have shared several core philosophical ideas that are identified in the postmodern movement. Here are some key tenets of postmodernism and theologians who have worked on them. The list is not exhaustive.

1. *Skepticism toward objective truth:*

Postmodernism rejects the idea that there is one objective truth that can be discovered through reason or empirical observation. This rejection is expressed in the works of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and other postmodern thinkers. Instead, truth is seen as a product of social and cultural factors. Stewart E. Kelly and James Dew stress in their book *Understanding Postmodernism*, that postmodern thinkers like Richard Rorty argue the social constructivism of truth and reject realism. For him, the goal is not to find the truth but to allow humans to find views that would help them cope with the difficulties of life. Truth is therapeutic.<sup>35</sup> John D. Caputo, a prominent postmodern theologian in his book *Truth*, argues that truth is not something that can be grasped objectively but is always conditioned by the cultural and linguistic context in which it arises.

2. *Emphasis on subjectivity*

Postmodernism emphasizes the importance of subjective experience and the individual's perspective. It is skeptical of the notion of a universal human nature or essence. Stewart and Dew define subjectivity as the “view that denies the possibility of epistemological objectivity and says that our perspective of the world is always determined by and situated within our own unique intellectual idiosyncrasies.”<sup>36</sup> They cite John Searle as he explains “A statement is epistemically subjective if its truth

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<sup>35</sup> Stewart E. Kelly and James K. Dew Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism: A Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 7

<sup>36</sup> Kelly and Dew Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 143.



depends essentially on the attitudes and feelings of observers.”<sup>37</sup> Our knowledge is clearly dependent on our minds, thus subjective. A paradigm shift took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century where objectivity was supplanted by subjectivity given the fact that reasons and social factors are involved in the construction of knowledge.

### *3. Skepticism toward metanarratives*

Postmodernism is skeptical of grand narratives or overarching accounts of history or society that claim to be universally applicable. It sees such narratives as oppressive and limiting. Because of the oppressive character of metanarrative, they should be rejected. Theologians who have worked on this concept include Jean-Francois Lyotard and his book *The Postmodern Condition*. He goes on to define Postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” Kelly and Dew note Millard Erickson’s point of view, when he says, “There is a strong measure of truth in this contention.”<sup>38</sup> in considering the idea that metanarratives have been oppressive.

### *4. Emphasis on fragmentation and plurality*

Postmodernism is characterized by a focus on the fragmentation and plurality of identity, language, and culture. This idea is explored in the work of Jacques Derrida, who developed the concept of ‘deconstruction’ to analyze how language and meaning are constructed and reconstructed.

### *5. The observer as situated*

Postmodern believe that the human person is more heavily situated than a neutral observer: any perspective that we have is shaped by our situation in life. It is also called ‘situatedness.’<sup>39</sup> It means that objectivity cannot be claimed when we assess our observation of the world. Humans are not abstract or isolated entities that can perceive

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<sup>37</sup> John R. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy In The Real World* (New York, IL: Basic, 2008), 44.

<sup>38</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise & Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity, 2001), 276.

<sup>39</sup> Kelly and Dew Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 5.

and understand reality objectively but are always situated within specific contexts that shape their perspectives, values, and beliefs. Overall, situatedness emphasizes the importance of recognizing and understanding the ways in which our experiences and understanding of the world are shaped by the larger social and cultural contexts in which we live.

#### *6. Self-reflexivity and irony*

Postmodernism is often characterized by self-consciousness and reflexivity about the limits of language and representation. “Postmodern reject the idea that language simply and transparently captures the world around us.”<sup>40</sup> Kelly and Dew stress the work of Derrida as one of the five notorious postmodern thinkers, as he considers the traditional view of language as flawed, he proposes that language should be understood differently and that it should be deconstructed, by being taken apart piece by piece to reveal what is truly going on beneath the surface.<sup>41</sup> They disagree with the notion that language is fixed across time and that it accurately depicts the world.

#### *7. Deconstruction of power structures*

Postmodernism challenges the dominant power structures and hierarchies. Power structures refer to the ways in which social and political power is distributed among individuals and groups, and how these power dynamics shape social relations and cultural production. Postmodernists argue that power structures are not natural or objective but constructed through language, discourse, and cultural practices. At Derrida’s heart, “Deconstruction is a politically motivated attack on the injustice of the traditional West and a call for a language and discourse to promote and reflect a fundamental commitment to justice.”<sup>42</sup> It seeks to reveal how dominant power structures are created and maintained

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<sup>40</sup> Kelly and Dew Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Kelly and Dew Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Kelly and Dew Jr., *Understanding Postmodernism*, 81.

through language and discourse and to expose the underlying assumptions and biases embedded within them.

#### *8. The rejection of the omniscience of reason*

Postmodern thinkers reject the confidence that modernity had in human reason and its ability to know the truth. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of his *Christian Theology*, Allister McGrath referred to this confidence as a belief in the “omniscience of the human reason.”<sup>43</sup> Modern scientific research has shown that human reason has limits and is often prone to error and bias. The evil that was perpetrated during the nineteenth century showed that humans could not achieve the high hopes that modern thinkers had.

Overall, the non-exhaustive list of the tenets of postmodernism shows that the movement is diverse and not easily described, and on many levels, contradicts the truth of the Bible and challenges traditional Christian doctrines. The next section would provide us with a better understanding of this movement in the light of the word of God.

### ***2.4. Biblical and Theological Understanding of Postmodernism (The Postmodern Challenge to Theology)***

Postmodernity has proven itself not to be easily defined, but having determined its characteristics, we are able to acknowledge its marks in society. As we make some progress in our work, we want to provide a biblical and theological understanding of postmodernism; again, the process will be like the one we undertook when we worked on the postmodern critique of Modernity. For a theological understanding of Postmodernism, we ought to give a brief overview of modern theology.

The modern era was the age of many revolutions (scientific, political industrial, philosophical, and theological). From Renee Descartes with his philosophical foundationalism to Galileo’s proving heliocentrism and many other enlightenment

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<sup>43</sup> Alister E McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 91.

thinkers, the nature of Christianity has been called into question. To keep up with the culture of the age, many theologians accommodated to modern thought to stay relevant. This is seen in the work of Frederick Schleiermacher, the German theologian who is the father of modern theology, with his reconstruction of Christian doctrines especially the doctrine of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, and Christology. He considered the “category of supernatural to be inimical to the true faith.”<sup>44</sup> It is the same for most liberal theologians. Olson described James Byrne’s three features of the Enlightenment and scientific revolution: “the omniscience of autonomous human reason, skepticism toward traditional beliefs not based on reason, including science, as virtuous, and scientism as the pathway toward progress.”<sup>45</sup> With modern thought, the center of our faith is ‘Man’ not God, thus it is ‘anthropocentric’. These elements stood in the way of Christianity in the sense that so often modern theologians have put aside core Christian beliefs in order to remain relevant to the modern culture. Modern theology gave us Christianity without power by rejecting any possibility of miracles and doubting the essentials of faith. J. Gresham Machen would argue in his book *Christianity and Liberalism* that modernity scorned the Christian faith. It gave rise to liberalism and naturalism. Gresham stresses liberalism as a modern non-redemptive religion that is rooted in naturalism. He goes on to define naturalism as “the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God in connection with the origin of Christianity.”<sup>46</sup>

Modern theologians have tried to make Christianity acceptable to contemporary culture. These theologians view the Bible as an ancient document that should be studied critically, rather than as the authoritative Word of God. To use the words of Veith in his book *Postmodern Times*, they have been ‘demythologizing’<sup>47</sup> the bible. They used the

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<sup>44</sup> Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 143.

<sup>45</sup> Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 27–28.

<sup>46</sup> John Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New Yor: Macmillan, 1923), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 194.

scientific method to explain biblical miracles in a non-supernatural way. However, despite these efforts, religion has persisted, challenging the idea that modern people are unable to believe in the supernatural. With the failure of modernity, came postmodernity. Veith highlights that if modern theology gave rise to rationalism, postmodernity gave rise to irrationality. Each one came with its own set of heresies. Modernists did not believe the bible is true; postmodernists cast out the category of truth altogether.<sup>48</sup> On having a theological understanding of postmodernism, we are to be reminded of the postulates of postmodernity that are quite opposite from modernity. Kevin J. Vanhoozer describes “the postmodern theory as the rejection of reason as absolute and universal, that individuals are autonomous, able to transcend their place in history, class, and culture, that universal principles and procedures are objective whereas preferences are subjective.”<sup>49</sup> Based on the understanding that we have of the postmodern theory, the framing of postmodern theology will follow the rejection of the same postulates displayed as the metanarratives.

From a biblical perspective, postmodernism can be seen as a threat to traditional Christian beliefs and practices, particularly in its rejection of absolute truth and its emphasis on individual subjectivity and cultural relativism. Also, it is seen as a challenge to the authority of the Bible and the church as it questions the idea of objective, universal truth claims. Vanhoozer suggests that “postmodern celebration of faith, stems from a refusal of orthodox Christian doctrine.”<sup>50</sup>

Many theologians have seen postmodernism as a challenge to traditional forms of theology, while others have seen it as an opportunity to rethink the relationship between theology and culture, as well as the relationship between theology and power. According to Olson, postmodern thinkers stood against foundationalism, a mode of knowledge

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<sup>48</sup> Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 192–93.

<sup>49</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>50</sup> Vanhoozer, *The Cambridge Companion*, 18.

associated with Enlightenment and modernity. They rejected the existence of such foundations and suggested coherence among ideas or narratives as the criterion of truth for any system of beliefs. The pursuit of the dream of foundationalism has led to the domination of an intellectual elite and the political power of the wealthy.<sup>51</sup> Again, even the choice of rejecting foundationalism for narrative positions them as opposed to the authority of the bible.

## ***PART II- DISCIPLESHIP***

“Follow me and I will make you!” (Matthew 4:19) This is the phrase that amounts to discipleship. Jesus invited his disciples to follow him, and he will make them. He established a model that followed his ascension to heaven, but also in the Old Testament, there are many instances of followership. Talking about discipleship is to follow, imitate, learn, to do as Christ did. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, says “When the bible speaks of following Jesus, it is proclaiming a discipleship which will liberate mankind from all man-made dogmas, from every burden and oppression, from every anxiety and torture which afflicts the conscience”<sup>52</sup> Discipleship brings true freedom and fellowship with the person who calls, in this case, Jesus, only if we make the choice to respond in obedience to the call for discipleship. Further, Bonhoeffer argues that discipleship is not about having a clear program or goal to follow, but rather involves a complete surrender of one’s old life and a willingness to follow Jesus without reservation. The disciple is called out of a life of relative security and into a life of absolute insecurity, but this is a liberating experience that opens infinite possibilities.

As we study the theme of discipleship, we understand that the call to disciple is at the very heart of God because of the command Jesus gave to his disciples to go and make

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<sup>51</sup> Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 651–52.

<sup>52</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Rev. [i.e. 2d] & unabridged ed. containing material not previously translated (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 37.

disciples, teaching them to obey all that he commanded them; and his presence would always be with them. The term discipleship covers different meanings depending upon the user and the context of use, but we want to focus on a biblical and theological understanding of discipleship.

## 2.5. *Definition of Words*

A disciple is from the Greek word, μαθητής is a learner, a pupil. Michael Wilkins, a New Testament professor, in his book *Following the Master*, defines a disciple in the general sense as a committed follower of a great master, and in the specific term as one who has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus.<sup>53</sup> He further explains the term disciple:

The *disciple* is the primary term used in the gospels to refer to Jesus' followers and is a common referent for those known in the early church as *believers*, *Christians*, *brothers/sisters*, *those of the Way*, or *saints*, although each term focuses upon different aspects of the individual's relationship with Jesus and others of the faith. The term was used most frequently in this specific sense; at least 230 times in the Gospels (e.g., Jn 6:66-71) and 28 times in Acts (e.g., Acts 9:1, 10, 19-20)<sup>54</sup>

The shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament word for discipleship is μαθητεύω which is translated as make a disciple of, teach. It appears in Matthew 13:52, 27:57, 28:19, and Acts 14:21.<sup>55</sup> The implication of the definition is the fact the word discipleship is not clearly defined in the lexicon, but its close meaning refers to making disciples, teaching, or becoming a pupil or disciple. Wilkins emphasizes two terms (discipleship and discipling) that help us to understand our subject. In modern usage, they refer to the ongoing growth process of a disciple and the responsibility of other disciples to help each other grow. These terms can be understood narrowly as the historical master-

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<sup>53</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 38.

<sup>54</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 40.

<sup>55</sup> F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. / revised by Frederick W. Danker. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 121.

disciple relationship or, more broadly, as believers' Christian experience. Christian discipleship and discipling involve growing as a Christian in every area of life.<sup>56</sup> Discipleship, therefore, implies a process, a journey, the idea of becoming like the master; Christian discipleship will be to become like Jesus, a Christ-centered life.

## **2.6. Biblical and Theological Understanding of Discipleship**

Biblical discipleship is shown in the pages of the Bible, from the Old to the New Testament. Whenever we think about discipleship, we are drawn to think of Jesus Christ since the goal is to be like him. However, discipleship did not start with Jesus incarnate, but it is seen also in the Old Testament with the call of Abraham, or the entire nation of Israel. We fully comprehend that a strong sense of calling permeates discipleship, and this calling is from God. He calls his people into a privileged relationship with him. Even though approaches to discipleship can look different between both Testaments, God is the initiator of the invitation, He is the one who calls and there are more lessons to learn.

### **2.6.1. Discipleship in the Old Testament:**

The idea of discipleship as a relationship between the master and the disciple is present in the Hebrew Bible even though the word "disciple" is not frequently used. Two words express the relationship master-disciple: *talmîdh* and *limmûdh*. The Hebrew equivalent for disciple is *talmîdh* which appears once in 1 Chronicles 25:8; it is derived from the verb 'to learn'(*lamadh*). "Within a classification of musicians, the noun indicates a pupil in contrast to a teacher."<sup>57</sup> The other word *limmûdh* which means 'taught' is also derived from the verb *lamadh* used by Isaiah and is used in many instances to speak about disciples (Isaiah 8:16, 50:4, 54:13) In Isaiah 8:16, the text seems

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<sup>56</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 41.

<sup>57</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 55.



to indicate that Isaiah had some disciples. Isaiah 50:4 implies one being taught by God emphasizing listening and speaking. Isaiah 54:13 expresses the teaching that will be done by the Lord, a relationship of Master and disciple is being established. It also appears in Jeremiah 2:24, 13:23; it has the meaning of “accustomed to” something while in Isaiah it means “taught” or “instructed.”<sup>58</sup>

Despite the rarity of the word disciple, Wilkins stresses the existence of a master-disciple relationship in the Old Testament. Karl Rengstorf highlights the concept of discipleship in the Old Testament, where it is best understood as the covenant relationship between God and Israel; he stresses the absence of Master-Disciple relation from the OT based on the history of words.<sup>59</sup> Wilkins best explains Rengstorf’s hesitation in his other book ‘Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew Gospel’ by the fact that Rengstorf “partly understands discipleship as falling into an either/or dichotomy, and partly because he thinks that discipleship to a person is necessarily preempts the place of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.”<sup>60</sup> The terminology of words does not determine the existence or not of discipleship but it is perceived by the needs and purposes of the people involved as Wilkins rightly said. There are many examples in the Old Testament that prove the contrary. Wilkins stresses that “all discipleship relationships are designed to lead Israel and individuals within the nation into a closer walk with the living God.”<sup>61</sup> Although the format of discipleship presented in the Old Testament is quite different from the New Testament and the Hellenistic tradition, it remains that God has always been the center of what we call Christian discipleship. Discipleship in the Old Testament also involved a commitment to the Word of God. The

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<sup>58</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 56.

<sup>59</sup> Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Volume IV)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 415–61,

<sup>60</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew’s Gospel, Second Edition*, vol. Second edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 51,

<sup>61</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 61.

Israelites are admonished to educate their children on God's instructions and to pass on their knowledge of God from one generation to the next in various passages in the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, it says, "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road when you lie down, and when you get up."

Relationships like Moses and Joshua demonstrate the discipleship that we have been talking about. Moses was first called by God to serve his people, (he was then the servant of God) then Joshua was appointed as the aide to serve Moses (Moses' servant) in carrying out the mission given to him by God, and finally appointed by God to take over after the death of Moses. God promised to be with Joshua (God's servant) as He was with Moses, his servant. He became the servant of God who served his people. Bill Hull extracts five characteristics of what humans need to grow from the discipleship relationship that exists between Joshua and Moses. He cites relationships to nurture, apprenticeship for competence, accountability for tasks, submission for shaping, and wisdom for decision-making.<sup>62</sup> As Joshua was well taught by Moses, and put in practice all that he learned, the Bible says that he served others well. "Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel" (Joshua 24:31).

Among the prophets, the relationship master-disciple is seen with Samuel standing as the leader of a group of prophets (1 Samuel 19:20-24); Elisha and the company of prophets, he is addressed as the leader of that company (2 Kings 4:1, 38). Wilkins notes that the sons of the prophets were not prophets in training but rather gathered around Elisha for guidance in performing their own prophetic activities.<sup>63</sup> He further referred to Robert Wilson who explains that the relationship Elisha has with the

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<sup>62</sup> Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), 56–57.

<sup>63</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 64.

prophets is a master-disciple relationship in mutual commitment to the service of God. We also can think of Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch (Jeremiah 36:32), Ezra, the teacher of the Law and priest for the people of Israel (Ezra 7:6,11), and the sages with the wisdom tradition (King Solomon, people came to learn from him, king Lemuel, Daniel, etc...). Wilkins suggests that the Master-disciple relationships behind the perpetuation and dissemination of the wisdom tradition would be found in informal father-son relationships, in the training of elders for making judicial decisions in the city gate...<sup>64</sup> William McKane stresses that the Master-disciple relationship was more apt to be found in the family/clan, in elder/leader training, and among wise men who were specialists in the wisdom tradition.<sup>65</sup>

In conclusion, even though the word "discipleship" is not used specifically in the Old Testament, the idea of obeying God and learning from spiritual leaders is prevalent throughout its pages. Biblical discipleship entails a tight relationship between a Master and a disciple, a dedication to the Bible, and a desire to grow in faith and obedience to God. Looking at the discipleship relationships that transpired in the Old Testament, Wilkins suggests that they were service oriented and aimed to prepare individuals to carry out God's work. The same thing happened in the New Testament, with Jesus mentoring his disciples to carry out his work and to make disciples of all nations.<sup>66</sup> The goal of growth was to serve God's people and point the way to Jesus. The discipleship connection that Jesus in the New Testament would lead his followers to, was foreshadowed in the Old Testament by the relationship between God and Israel. Following God is the expression of loving Him with all your heart and soul. The connection started by God in the Old Testament finds its culmination in Jesus, who took up these themes to convey the essence of discipleship.

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<sup>64</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 65.

<sup>65</sup> William McKane, "Prophets and Wise Men (Naperville, Ill: Alec R. Allenson, 1965), 40–47.

<sup>66</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 66–69.

### 2.6.2. *Discipleship in the New Testament*

Discussing the theme of discipleship in the New Testament helps us to see the fulfillment of God's promises and the evolution of the significance of the word disciple (μαθητής (*mathētēs*). Over time the world evolved from the ancient Greece environment to the New Testament context. It went from learner to disciple, to pupil. From the time of the writing of the New Testament, Wilkins says a *mathētēs* was a committed follower of a great master, and the relationship between the follower and the master extended to the imitation of the master's conduct. Christianity encountered people who already had a concept of disciple in the Hellenistic world and the world of the diaspora.<sup>67</sup> they were various types of discipleship that were taking place during Jesus' earthly ministry; however, in order for us to understand the discipleship type of Jesus, we need to survey discipleship in the first century. Wilkins finds evidence of discipleship relationships in the writings from Philo of Alexandria, the Qumran community, the Gospels, Josephus, and rabbinical literature.<sup>68</sup> Discipleship was first unstructured in the Old Testament, but with the assistance of some leaders, it became more systematic. As a result, mass education began to emphasize Scripture knowledge and memorizing. The Bible mentions several organized groups that attest to master-disciple relationships before the baptism of our Lord Jesus-Christ. In the Gospels, we have the Pharisees and their disciples, (Matthew 22:15-16) John the Baptist and his disciples, some disciples who called themselves the disciples of Moses (John 9:24-29), and the Zealots, who were more on the political side. For many of these groups, the relationship with the master-disciple was emphasized in the teaching of the Torah and knowing the oral tradition for the Pharisees, living an ascetic life for John the Baptist and his followers, and the Law and other groups who were for military purposes, with the goal of overthrowing the Roman government.

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<sup>67</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 78.

<sup>68</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 82.

Our Lord comes in a world that is greatly religious; discipleship is already established in the Judaism tradition. Rabbinic schools are flourishing.

Jesus functioned in a setting where both experts and laypeople had a high level of Scripture knowledge and memorization. Jesus' ministry with his followers was characterized by the intimate bond between Himself and those He called. As we will see further, Jesus' discipleship style even though it looks similar to Jewish's, in practice, it was quite different. We see that, Jesus' disciples were questioned over the practice of fasting because John the Baptist's disciples were fasting, same with Pharisees' disciples (Mark 2:18). Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray as other masters were teaching their disciples (Luke 11:1-4). We want to assume that the disciples were still trying to comprehend their Master style of discipleship. Wilkins cites T.W. Manson's thesis to explain the terminology that Jesus uses for his disciples which is *shewalya* instead of the common *talmîdh*, the reason behind this terminology, Manson suggests, is that "the life of a *talmîdh* was made up of the study of the sacred writings, attendance on lectures, and discussion of difficult passages or cases. Discipleship as Jesus conceived it was not a theoretical discipline of this sort, but a practical task to which men were called to give themselves and all their energies... discipleship was not matriculation in a Rabbinical college but apprenticeship to the work of the kingdom."<sup>69</sup> This means that Jesus' approach to discipleship, was more than attending a class of discipleship, but training a person holistically. It was revolutionary and transforming. The difference was there between the formal discipleship of the Judaism tradition and Jesus' style. Of course, not everyone understood him, but those who got him right did wonders as we still talk about the apostles today.

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas Walter Manson, "The Teaching of Jesus: Studies of Its Form and Content" (D.Litt., Scotland, University of Glasgow), 239–40,

## 2.7. *The Call to Discipleship*

In this part we want to examine Jesus' call of his disciple and how did he minister to them.

Just as we have seen earlier, a disciple is a learner, someone who puts himself at the disposal of his Master. He doesn't set the rule and prescribe the term. Discipleship starts with a call from the Lord. In his earthly ministry, after his baptism, he started the call with Simon and Andrew, then James and his brother John (Mark 1:16-18; Luke 5:1-11, 27-28)—each one who was called left whatsoever they were doing to follow the one who called them. The call to follow Jesus cuts off the disciples from their previous existence and placed them in a position where faith is possible. Faith engages the disciple in an obedient response. On the contrary, when some of those who were not called, came to Jesus, they could not follow because of their lack of allegiance (Luke 9:57-62). Jesus initiates the call and never the other way around. He calls and people respond in obedience by faith. This pattern of calling is seen throughout the Gospels. J.D. Kingsbury, in his article *On Following Jesus: The Eager Scribe and the Reluctant Disciple* argues that the decision to commit to a life of discipleship does not lie in oneself, but it is by the enablement of Jesus himself or by his Spirit if we want to use our context.

It serves to accentuate the great authority with which Jesus calls persons to become his disciples and the absolute obedience and commitment with which those summoned answer his call. In elucidating how one becomes a disciple, this pattern shows that initiative lies exclusively with Jesus. It is by virtue of his authority alone that one can embark upon the life of discipleship and sustain it.<sup>70</sup>

In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer stresses that Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship.”<sup>71</sup> For Bonhoeffer, Christianity cannot be reduced to a concept or a body of teachings; rather, it necessitates a personal decision to follow Christ. The only

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<sup>70</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, “On Following Jesus: The ‘Eager’ Scribe and the ‘Reluctant’ Disciple (Matthew 8.18–22),” *New Testament Studies* 34, no. 1 (1988): 49.

<sup>71</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 59.

authentic means to relate to Christ as the Mediator between God and humans in that scenario is through discipleship. We should be concerned about a Christianity that ignores discipleship and places a singular emphasis on faith in God or lofty notions of grace and forgiveness.<sup>72</sup> Such religion finally brings discipleship to an end and is contrary to the very idea of following Christ. One can only really comprehend and encounter God's grace by choosing to follow Christ. Bonhoeffer is not contradicting Kingsbury, but he is moving one step forward in talking about the response to the call. The response is to be made in obedience to the call. The obedience is prompted by faith, as he says, "only the obedient believe."<sup>73</sup> We remember the statement of Jesus in Luke 11:23 "Who is not with me is against me." The response to the call marks the end of the old life and engagement to a new one (Mark 8:34-38). There is a cost that comes with discipleship: to bear our cross and to follow Christ; that is the reason we are called to count the cost. True faith requires no allegiances that would hinder following Jesus.<sup>74</sup> Luke 14:26 says "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." According to what he understands to be the priorities of a person's heart, Jesus individualizes the cost of discipleship. As a multitude is invited to the calling, Jesus engages the commitment and the enablement of his followers. While doing so, he sifts the followers, because he knows that at this point not all who follow are committed. The feeding of the five thousand in John 6 shows that the multitude after eating wanted to make him king, (John 6:15-16), but his true followers were faced with the teaching on the spiritual food. Many couldn't take that teaching, and they left. They stopped following Jesus. Kingsbury equates *following Jesus* to *discipleship*. Matthew's use of the term 'to follow' is characterized by

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<sup>72</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 59.

<sup>73</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 64.

<sup>74</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 110.

“a personal commitment and cost.”<sup>75</sup> The writings of Matthew portray the verb to follow as meaning a literal following, (going after physically), but in many instances like Matthew 4:20, 22; 8:21-22, 23; 9:9; 19:27-29; to follow connotes discipleship because it involves commitment and cost. Based on the exegesis that Kingsbury makes of the verb to follow, Wilkins concludes that “Following Jesus is a technical expression for going after him as a disciple. The disciple is the one who has counted the cost, has made a commitment of faith, and has then followed Jesus.”<sup>76</sup> Overall, the call to discipleship involves a response, and a commitment to follow and bear one’s cross daily.

### ***2.7.1. The Dimensions of Discipleship***

As the disciples responded to the call to discipleship, they let go of hindrances that could cost their allegiances to the master. The next step to the call is growth. Jesus in the process of teaching his disciples, did so individually and situationally. He cared about their physical and spiritual needs, and their lives as members of a community. Disciples were not supermen, they were chosen gracefully, called to eternal life like any other sinner, to service and to growth in godliness. They grew wholly. Some disciplines were applied to them in the process of learning. Many like Richard Foster and Dallas Willard wrote extensively on spiritual disciplines for the spiritual growth of the disciple, but we do not just want a systematization of a spiritual life without an engagement of the heart nor the move of the spirit having room to deal with one’s life. Three dimensions of discipleship are emphasized in our determination of disciplines: spiritual, ethical, and communal.

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<sup>75</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Verb Akolouthein (‘To Follow’) as an Index of Matthew’s View of His Community,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97, no. 1 (1978): 58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3265836>.

<sup>76</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 125.



### **2.7.1.1. Spiritual Dimension**

The spiritual aspect of our life as a disciple starts with the ‘New Born’ experience. That is the encounter Nicodemus had with our Lord and Savior Jesus in John 3:1-15. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. We need to be born again to be part of the family of Christ. The Spirit of God comes and dwells on us. We become new creature and the Spirit of God will then produce growth from our hearts. Slowly or rapidly, change takes place inwardly and the manifestation is seen outwardly. The priorities of life change. As we said earlier, being a disciple entails carrying one’s cross. Mark 8:34-38 says “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” Disciples are called to live for the one they have pledged allegiance to; it, therefore, means denying oneself and following Christ daily. The heart and mind are set up on Christ; learning from the Lord’s teachings and walking in obedience to his commandments according to Matthew 28:19. Not only obeying but imitating the master in his prayer routine. Prayer is the element of communication that Jesus used on earth to communicate with the Father through the Holy Spirit, disciples also are called to have prayerful lives of communication with the Lord through the Holy Spirit.

### **2.7.1.2. Ethical Dimension**

The ethical aspect of discipline is prompted by the result of Jesus’ teachings. He invites his disciples to live an abundant life but not at the expense of his teachings. He called them to live perfectly as their Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). Gordon MacDonald, in his book ‘Christ Followers in the Real World’ describes what it means to follow Christ through life. He says “To follow Christ through life is to drive all my relationships, all my moral and ethical values, the management of all my assets, my

career choices, my perspective on struggle, pleasure, and pain, and my ultimate view of life, death, and afterlife on the basis of what He has said and done as a precedent and assume that this is what it means to please God, my Maker”<sup>77</sup> The sermon of the mount is paramount to the disciple’s attitude toward life. To show love, humility, kindness, genuineness.

### **2.7.1.3. Communal Dimension**

The communal aspect implies the presence of other disciples to accompany us on the journey. God. Our commitment to Jesus should be personal and communal. The famous proverb says Iron sharpens iron, and the need to be surrounded by a community of believers promotes growth. As Jesus is with us when alone, He’s also present when we found ourselves in various places.

As we grow in the Lord, we are being trained daily to follow, serve, and surrender to our Lord Jesus.

## ***2.8. Challenges Christianity Faces with Postmodernism***

Postmodernism opposes Christianity on various elements of its essential core beliefs. David Porteous, in his article “A Christian View of Postmodernism and its Roots,” gives a non-exhaustive list of points where Christianity challenges postmodernism.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Gordon MacDonald, *Christ Followers in the Real World* (Nashville, TN: Oliver-Nelson, 1991), 38.

<sup>78</sup> Porteous, “A Christian View of Postmodernism and Its Roots,” 13–16.

### **2.8.1. *On the matter of truth***

Postmodernists believe that there is no objective truth and objective reality. Of course, this view is at odds with the Christian worldview. Walter Truett Anderson, a Chronicler of postmodernism explained the problem of truth this way:

Postmodernity challenges the view that the truth is- as Isaiah Berlin put it- one and undivided, the same for all men everywhere at all times. The newer view regards any truth as socially constructed, contingent, and inseparable from the peculiar needs and preferences of certain people in a certain time and place. This notion has many implications- it leaves no value, custom, belief, or eternal verity totally untouched.<sup>79</sup>

Postmodern thinkers believe that reality is constructed by language while Christianity's claim on objective truth is rooted in Scripture because we believe that the Bible is the very word of God, inerrant and infallible. "The Christian worldview, contra-postmodernism understands language not as a self-referential, merely human and ultimately arbitrary system of signs that is reducible to contingent cultural factors, but as the gift of a rational God entrusted to beings made in his own image and likeness."<sup>80</sup> We come to know this truth by the fact that we are made in the likeness and the image of God, thus the knowledge of God is made available to us through his nature as He is the God of Truth, the source of all truth, He does not change nor lie. Modernity and Christianity accept the existence of objective truths, unlike postmodernity.

### **2.8.2. *On the Matter of Logic and Reason***

There is an understanding of the postmodern rejection of Modernity, due to their rejection of logic and reason rendering their comprehension of life to be meaningless. Moreover, it will be impossible for them to have a meaningful and coherent conversation or presentation of arguments. Understanding the Scriptures requires using reason, but this

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<sup>79</sup> Walt Anderson, *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person* (New York: J.P. Tarcher, 1997), 27.

<sup>80</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2000), 66.

reason is not just human; it is reason that is guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the authority of the Scriptures.

### ***2.8.3. On the Matter of Science***

There is an essential gap between postmodernism and the Christian scientific perspective. Although postmodernism tends to be skeptical of scientific claims, Christians hold the belief that the universe is rational and was created by a rational God, which has been a guiding principle for scientific inquiry. The argument also makes the point that the idea of a rational creator is necessary for scientific progress. The argument, however, correctly warns against the modernist propensity to see science as the only source of truth because this worldview may overlook the bigger picture of God's creation and purpose. Considering the Christian worldview, the argument promotes a fair strategy that acknowledges both the value of scientific investigation and the boundaries of scientific understanding.

### ***2.8.4. On the Matter of Metanarratives***

Postmodernism rejects the totalitarian effect that is usually caused by metanarratives, they are oppressive and violent. Postmodern view metanarrative as the main cause of societal problems. While this can be true for some meta-narratives, biblical non-modern meta-narrative far from promoting violence of any kind, is invitational and loving. "The story the Scriptures tell contains the resources to shatter totalizing readings, to convert the reader, to align us with God's purposes of shalom, compassion and justice."<sup>81</sup> The God of the Bible is the one who paid the price for all the sinners so that they can turn from their evil ways and come to him for eternal life.

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<sup>81</sup> J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1995), 107.

#### ***2.8.5. On the matter of ethics***

Postmodernism rejects absolutes. Gene Edward said, “Relative values accompany the relativism of truth.”<sup>82</sup> This is why we observe the legalization of abortion as a constitutional right, while twenty years ago, it would have been considered wrong. Christian ethics bases morals and values on the Word of God. These values are universal, they don’t change depending on the place or country we found ourselves in.

#### ***2.8.6. On the matter of the authority of the Word of God***

According to Alisa Childers, a Christian apologist, and author, postmodern deconstructionists view the Bible to be “an antiquated library of books that we can examine like ancient relics; it is our spiritual ancestors’ best attempts to understand God in their own cultures, using whatever knowledge they had at the time.”<sup>83</sup> There is a problem with the interpretation of the Scriptures; Postmodern assume our ancestors read the Bible according to the knowledge that was available to them in their times, and that we should do the same. The Bible is not to be read as an authoritative text, but as a fluid, due to the various interpretation at various times. In contrast, Christians believe that the Word of God is authoritative, infallible, and inerrant. Childers says that if the Bible is reliable both in text and in eyewitness testimony, then we have good reason to believe.<sup>84</sup> The reliability comes from the fact that God who gave the Word is reliable, and we trust His Word because He is God, the creator of the universe and He does not lie.

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<sup>82</sup> Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Alisa Childers, *Another Gospel? A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity* (Carol Stream, Ill: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 156.

<sup>84</sup> Childers, *Another Gospel?*, 166.

### 2.8.7. *On the matter of humans*

Postmodernist thought dismantles humanism, it goes on to diminish human beings, attacking personality and the very concept of the individual.<sup>85</sup> Postmodernism engages in the death of humans or the self. Just as modernity emphasized the greatness of Man, postmodernism is deconstructing that human. Humans are equated to animals; according to Ingrid Newkirk, president of People for The Ethical Treatment of Animals, “A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy.”<sup>86</sup> A human should not be more privileged than an animal because they are just the same. It is not the case with Christians. They believe in the immortality of the soul. God created us with the elements of the ground, but He puts in us his Spirit. If we die, the physical perishes, but the immaterial which is the Spirit returns to God in waiting for the redemption and resurrection of the Self. Animals don’t have that promise. Romans 6:6-8 says this:

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin... Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

Postmodernism challenges the values of Christian belief., On the contrary, Christianity is founded on the word of God. This Word doesn't suffer the challenges of the day and remains constant throughout. In questioning postmodern values our goal is to determine approaches to discipleship, that can be appealing to the postmodern population. Another observation from studying postmodernism reveals that the communal aspect of living is promoted in postmodern thought and while they reject metanarrative, they are inclined to accept local narratives.

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<sup>85</sup> Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 71.

<sup>86</sup> Charles W. Colson and Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *The Body*, [Expanded ed.]--p. [xiii] (Dallas: Word Pub., 1996), 176.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CHALLENGES OF DISCIPLESHIP IN POSTMODERN CULTURE**

“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father, except through me.” John 14:6.

In his book, *The Case for Christ* (there is a movie adaptation), Lee Strobel, an atheist, a journalist, and a lawyer decides to investigate the claims of Christianity when his wife became a Christian. On his journey, he examined the records on whether the bible is a verifiable text by talking with different Christian theologians, and extra-biblical texts that mention Jesus, then he analyzes the results and the elements proving the physical resurrection of Jesus. He ends up becoming Christian because the results of his investigation confirmed the claims of Jesus. The bible’s claims are all true, not because we say it, but because the Word of God proved itself true.

#### ***3.1. The Biblical View of the Truth***

The notion of truth as we understand it, has been controversial for the postmodern mind. The culture in which we find ourselves denaturalizes the truth to make it sound relative. Truth is dependent on the culture, the context, and people, according to the postmodern mindset. Christians take an alternate position when it comes to knowing what Truth is. They view the Bible as the foundation for truth upon which everything else is built. The Bible claims to be true. “It speaks authoritatively not only on what things are true but on the nature of truth itself.”<sup>87</sup> In the Bible, we learn about who God is and how

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<sup>87</sup> Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 60.

He presents the Scriptures, His Word as the truth true. The majority of committed Christians believe all the claims of the Bible.

Truth in the Old Testament comes from the verb אָמַן() which is the root word from which we derive the notion of truth that signifies *support*, to *sustain*.<sup>88</sup> The Dictionary of the Bible uses the two words together as their meaning overlap. They both convey the notion of Constancy, Steadfastness, and faithfulness.<sup>89</sup> Truth as a divine attribute, demonstrates God's constancy to his people and the faithfulness by which he has fulfilled his covenant. And he said, "Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His mercy and His truth toward my master. As for me, being on the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren." (Genesis 24:27). "I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me, In righteousness and justice, In lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, And you shall know the Lord (Hosea 2:19-20). The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. (Psalm 145:18) (Psalm 89, 98:3, 100:3). Truth as a divine attribute, seems to be contemplated more generally as one of the great elements in God's character. 'The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth,' (Exodus 34:6). The true God in contrast with the false gods: 'Into Your hand, I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O Lord God of truth. I have hated those who regard useless idols, But I trust in the Lord.' (Psalm 31:5-6 New King James Version); (2 Chronicles 15:3; Jeremiah 10:10 for a parallel). The character of integrity, fidelity, honesty, loyalty, justice, and steadiness is revealed in the concept of truth.

Kevin Vanhoozer in his exegesis of the word Truth says, "The Hebrew term 'eh'-meth connotes what is firm, reliable, trustworthy, and faithful and expresses the character

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<sup>88</sup> James Hastings et al., *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 816.

<sup>89</sup> Hastings et al., *Dictionary of the Bible*, 817.



of a person's speech, thought or action.”<sup>90</sup> His understanding of the word joins back V.H. Stanton in saying the idea of Truth stands against any form of deceitfulness and unfaithfulness as the people who worshiped other gods.

Truth in the New Testament comes from the Greek word ἀλήθεια, (read alétheia). According to New Testament translators, “ἀλήθεια was a word of larger meaning and though the same ideas were not connected with it because of its derivation and history, it conveyed, even according to classical usage, the notion, not simply of agreement between speech and fact, but of reality.”<sup>91</sup> Truth in the New Testament is deepened and enlarged explicitly in the Epistles and Gospels, especially John.

In Synoptics and Acts, the word ἀλήθεια is used to describe Character, not simply speech and doctrine. ‘And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men.’ (Matthew 22:16); it also conveys the earnestness of asseveration.<sup>92</sup> ‘But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah when heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land.’ (Luke 4:25).

In the Gospel of John, the Bible declares that the truth came through Jesus. “John uses truth vocabulary in its conventional sense of veracity /genuineness /opposite of falsehood, but also develops his particular meaning, where truth refers to the reality of God the Father revealed in Jesus the Son.”<sup>93</sup> ‘For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.’ (John 1:17). This verse shows continuity in both Testaments. Jesus is the connexion to the truth, for without him there is no truth, for

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<sup>90</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 819.

<sup>91</sup> Hastings et al., *Dictionary of the Bible*, 818.

<sup>92</sup> Hastings et al., *Dictionary of the Bible*, 818.

<sup>93</sup> B. Joel, McKnight Green, and Howard Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 859.

it came through him. ‘Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’ (John 31-32); Jesus is equated to the truth. ‘Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’ (John 14:6). As the witness to the Truth, John the Baptist paved the way to the Truth who is not a mere generic character, but the person of Jesus-Christ. ‘You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth.’ (John 5:33). The persons of the Trinity are all identified with the Truth (The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). The Spirit came from the Father who is the Truth, He will reveal Jesus to the world and lastly, not least, he will lead the disciples into the truth by further instructing them in the knowledge of the Father and the Son. ‘When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.’ (John 15:26).

In the epistles, Truth connotes the divine characteristic of fidelity. ‘Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers’ (Romans 15:8). Truth is not merely ethical, but it is the truth is all its fullness, and scope, as embodied in Him. He is the perfect expression of the truth.<sup>94</sup> ‘If indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus’ (Ephesians 4:21). This verse is equivalent to the passage of John 14:6. There is a contrast just as in the Old Testament between the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of falsehood. Paul addresses those who deny the reality of God behind creation. ‘For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. (Romans 1:18)

In summary, the biblical view of truth, both in Hebrew and Greek, connotes faithfulness, reality, embodiment, veracity, facts, and opposition to falsehood and

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<sup>94</sup> W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White Jr, “*Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, 1985” (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, n.d.), 645.

unfaithfulness. It is hard to prove that Truth, according to the Bible is constructed as postmodernists assume. This Truth is not affected by culture, it is not learned, it is a given and God's people conform to it by faith and obedience.

### ***3.2. The Characteristics of the Biblical view of Truth in the Postmodern Culture***

The survey of the word Truth shows that Truth comes from God; it is revealed. God revealed Himself to us through His Holy Spirit in the creation, Psalm 19 captures the creation perfectly, the general and special revelations of God at work together. 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands... The Statutes of the Lord are trustworthy... The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous...' The Law of God is written in the heart of every single human being, so God made his existence known to us; 'for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves, their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.' (Romans 2:14-15); There is, therefore, no excuse for those who believe in the non-existence of God. 'Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God... who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.' (Romans 1:21-25)

#### ***3.2.1 Truth is revealed***

God revealed Himself by His Holy Spirit in His Word. Paul Hiebert in his book "Transforming Worldviews" says, the Bible is the history of God's progressive revelation of himself to humans."<sup>95</sup> He breaks the revelation of God in the Bible by showing in the

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<sup>95</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 266.

Old Testament how God chose a people and prepared them to be recipients and messengers of his revelation; and this revelation culminates in the person of Jesus-Christ, God in the flesh.<sup>96</sup> God called whomever He wanted to so that His plans and purposes would come to pass. Scripture represents for us the book of instruction and revelation by which we get to know God; we read the story. In reading the Word, we understand that even the wisest man on earth could not have come up with the story of the Bible that comprehensively addresses creation, fall, redemption, and the future hope in Christ for the believers. By the Word, the servant of God is warned and led. The Word of God serves as our instructions; ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.’ (2 Timothy 3:16). The Word of God is also a judge, displaying the characteristics of the Truth. If Truth connotes justice, the Word of God displays the same. ‘For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.’ Hebrews 4:12. “The Christian worldview, contra-postmodernism, understands language not as a self-referential, merely human and ultimately arbitrary system of signs that is reducible to contingent cultural factors, but as the gift of a rational God entrusted to beings made in his image in likeness.”<sup>97</sup> Christians believe the Word of God, the Scriptures, not because they created them, but because of the revelation that is attached to it; the Word of God serves as an anchor, an unshakable pillar that has proven itself to be true, but also because of the divine character of God. God doesn’t just want us to believe everything but invites us to examine all the claims made in his Word. ‘Test everything; hold fast what is good (Thessalonians 5:21).

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<sup>96</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 266.

<sup>97</sup> Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 66.

Postmodernists would disagree with the concept of truth being revealed because they advocate for a constructivist epistemology, meaning truth is constructed, or created. For them, Truth is created by human language and perception. Any epistemology that seeks to define reality as something outside of us rather than as the result of human cognition is rejected by postmodernists. In contrast, Christians would affirm that Truth precedes reality, and is prior to knowledge. It is not dependent on our perception, or our worldview. Walter Truett stresses that for postmodern thinkers, “life is perspectival or that reality is mediated to us by our worldview.”<sup>98</sup> Our perception of reality does not affect the Truth, whether it is believed or not, Truth is revealed.<sup>99</sup>

### **3.2.2 *Truth is knowable***

The Truth is therefore made available to everyone, it is knowable. The Bible itself declares that understanding the Word of God gives a fundamental framework for all of life. ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (Psalm 111:10); ‘the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth’ (Ephesians 5:9). ‘In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Colossians 2:3). Without the Lord, there is no true wisdom. True wisdom comes from God, who knows everything and shares it with his creation. The foundation of the truth is built in the divine; it is built in God himself. We know what we know because of God.

Unlike postmodern thinkers who think of truth as being subjective and dependent on culture and /or worldviews, the truth of the Word of God does not lie in any human perception, but in the claims of the one who said he is the Truth. “For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly

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<sup>98</sup> J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 32-33.

<sup>99</sup> D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 5.

not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar.” Romans 3:3-4 NIV. Postmodernism emphasizes the existence of communities and their practices over the Truth; nonetheless, the church also as a community has its practices and cultures, but none of them supersedes the objectivity of Truth. The focus of the church’s worship, instruction, sermons, fellowship, outreach, and service must be undergirded by revealed and objective truth since it serves both as the unifying and motivating force. Paul says the church is the pillar and the ground of truth. ‘I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.’ 1 Timothy 3:15. John also invites us to bear witness to the truth. (John 18:36).

### ***3.2.3 Truth is authoritative and absolute***

Scriptures have always been under scrutiny by critics, doing everything to prove the Bible not to be true. There is a need for evidence for them to accept the authorial claim. However, many critics of the claim of the Bible have not been able to disprove the truth of the Bible. Morris Inch, a professor of Biblical Studies, stresses that “the Bible is a collection of works compiled over a span of sixteen hundred years, involving more than forty authors, reflecting a stated or generally implied consensus concerning the character of scripture.”<sup>100</sup> Many authors did not know each other, but they were able to write things they witnessed and perceived things to come, and it came to pass as they spoke from God. It was possible only by the revelation of God. Isaiah spoke about Jesus, centuries before he came, and this prophecy was fulfilled like many others. And when Jesus came on earth, He lived according to the Word. The episode on the desert shows us very well how he did not use anything else to defend himself, but the Word. He said “It is

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<sup>100</sup> Morris A. Inch, *A Case for Christianity* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House, 1997), 96.

written...”there by declaring that any so-called ‘truth’ that shifts cannot be true because it is wrong at least occasionally. This is not the case with the Truth of Scriptures.

We can attest to the authority of the Scriptures in the sense that none of the prophets who spoke, did so on his own, they spoke on behalf of God, they were all mouthpieces of God, and they were inspired by God. In contrast, other prophets were called false because they spoke from their minds. ‘Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who prophesy, and say to those who prophesy out of their own heart ‘Hear the word of the Lord!’ (Ezekiel 13:2). God’s Word was put in the mouth of Jeremiah. ‘Then the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me: “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.’ (Jeremiah 1:9). Same with Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18). Reading the New Testament shows also that the Old Testament carried authority because so many authors cited the words of the Old Testament.

The same phenomena happen with the Word of the New Testament. They have the same authority as the Old. Jesus-Christ brings the absoluteness of Scriptures when He declares to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6). Paul added concerning idolatry, ‘Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.’ (1 Corinthians 8:4-6). The Truth of God cannot be suppressed to please people who are not comfortable with the absoluteness of the Word of God. Scripture rejects any form of compromise, nor to add or subtract from the word to make it look appealing to some. ‘You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.’ (Deuteronomy 4:2). Faithfulness is therefore required.

### 3.2.4 *The catholic character of the Truth*

The word catholic means universal. In other words, applicable to everybody. The universal character of Truth is not restricted by a territory or a culture, so it is with the Gospel. It has no expiration date, nor is it dependent on seasons. Groothuis stresses that the gospel message and the moral law of God are not limited by cultural conditions, and salvation is available to all humanity through Jesus-Christ.<sup>101</sup> Acts 4:12 ‘Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.’ The New Testament emphasizes the supremacy of Christ and his authority over everything. Ephesians 1:21-22 ‘far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet and gave Him to be head over all things to the church.’ The theologian Carl F. H. Henry says this:

Christianity contends that revelational truth is intelligible, expressible in valid propositions, and universally communicable. Christianity does not profess to communicate a meaning that is significant only within a particular community or culture. It expects men of all cultures and nations to comprehend its claims about God and insists that men everywhere ought to acknowledge and appropriate them.<sup>102</sup>

We see this unfolding in Matthew 28:18-20 ‘And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen!

Postmodernists, on the contrary, propose a community-based standard for truth. Postmodernists make the mistake of focusing nearly exclusively on the community while omitting the fact that communities are made up of people. When something is denounced on an individual level, there is an urge for the community to applaud it. Mob behavior

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<sup>101</sup> Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 72.

<sup>102</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority, 6 Vols.*” (Waco, TX: Word, 1983 [1976]): 1:229.



encourages people to commit wicked things that they would never have thought to undertake on their own. So, the community can be just as flawed and terrible as the individual because the group is made up of individuals. By enabling each group to choose its standards, pluralism is implicitly accepted, thereby accepting alternate truth claims.

### **3.2.5 *Truth is exclusive***

The spirit of this age leads us to be inclusive of all the different truths that have been developed. However, God, in making Himself known, showed us a particular way of coming to him through the Son. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6) Any other way doesn’t apply. The Truth of God transcends the ages, it changes people’s hearts and is reliable. Psalm 119:11 ‘Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You.’ Forgiveness and redemption derive from the Truth. God is one, the only true God, besides him there is no other God. All other claims are false, handmade gods are just idols. R. J. Rushdoony commented, “Truth is exact and precise, and the slightest departure from the truth is the substitution of falsity for truth”<sup>103</sup> As we have learned that Truth comes from God and we know that all truth is God’s truth, we should be careful to take all claims of truth as true if they do not pass the test of consistency. Paul Feinberg in making the case for the truth of Christianity, proposes the tests for truth; and the most important is the test of consistency which can be summarized as any set of beliefs that contradicts itself is false.<sup>104</sup> A claim can’t be true and false at the same time. The strongest form of disproof is to demonstrate that a contradiction can be produced from a set of beliefs. And this has been seen with the postmodern beliefs system. Leith Anderson, a megachurch pastor, gives the example

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<sup>103</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church* (Fairfax, VA.: Thoburn, 1978), 118.

<sup>104</sup> Zondervan et al., *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 107.

of a young man who says that he believes in reformed theology, the inerrancy of Scripture, and reincarnation.<sup>105</sup> Generally, people who think this way don't think through what they believe; even when the inconsistency is pointed out to them, they hardly change for the Truth, because they believe what they like. The young man from the example narrated earlier does not realize that Christians do not believe in reincarnation, but resurrection. Veith points out that "Religion is not seen as a set of beliefs about what is real and what is not. Rather, religion is seen as a preference, a choice. We believe what we want."<sup>106</sup> That is the way to relativism.

### ***3.2.6 Truth is unified***

In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth. (Genesis 1:1). God is the starting point of everything. "In the beginning, there is God, He alone is one and eternal, all creation –angels, humans, animals, plants, matter, and energy—is dependent at every moment on God's ongoing creation for its very existence."<sup>107</sup> God is one, He put all his creation in a world of order, and there is no overlapping. The reality of life is closely related to the Truth of God because both originate from God. For in him, Christ, we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28). In the present age, there is a proliferation of knowledge and opinions that are often conflicting, and this can make it difficult for Christians to make sense of the world around them. As such, they need to have a comprehensive and cohesive understanding of reality that considers various aspects of life, meaning a worldview that is consistent with the unity of the Scriptures. This worldview should be biblically sound and effectively communicable in various contexts. the center of Christian's worldview is Christ himself. Francis Schaeffer declares:

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<sup>105</sup> Leith Anderson gave the example in a presentation, "Facing the Future," at the Evangelical Press Association Convention, St Paul, Minnesota, 12 May 1993.

<sup>106</sup> Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 193.

<sup>107</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 269.

It is no use saying He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the Lord of all things if He is not the Lord of my whole unified intellectual life. I am false or confused if I sing about Christ's lordship and contrive to retain areas of my own life that are autonomous.<sup>108</sup>

Christians strive for a coherent and biblical worldview.

### ***3.2.7 Christian truth is an end, not a means to any other end.***

The pursuit of Truth is not a tool or instrument to achieve any other purpose or goal. Instead, Truth is valued for its own sake and sought after as an ultimate objective. It implies for Christians that the pursuit of truth is not optional or secondary, but the central aspect of the Christian faith, and that the ultimate goal of this pursuit is to deepen one's understanding of God and to live by God's will. Harry Blamires declares:

There is no subtler perversion of Christian faith than to treat it as a mere means to a worldly end, however admirable that end in itself may be. The Christian Faith is important because it is true. What it happens to achieve, in us or others, is another and strictly speaking, a secondary matter.<sup>109</sup>

This statement is not valid for postmodernists; for them, truth is what works. Unlike Christian faith teaches that "it works or bears spiritual fruit only because it is true."<sup>110</sup>

In summary, a biblical understanding of Truth is what Christians need to be able to face the challenge of postmodernism. Christians are called to affirm the biblical view of truth and engage in critical dialogue with postmodern ideas. Ultimately, our response to postmodernism should be to live out the truth of the Gospel in our own lives. Truth corresponds to reality.

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<sup>108</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2006), 83.

<sup>109</sup> Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind, How Should a Christian Think* (Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design, 1963), 104.

<sup>110</sup> Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 81.

### ***3.3. Postmodernism and His Effects on Christian Beliefs***

Postmodernism encompasses various views but shares certain commonalities. These include a focus on local communities with an emphasis on the particularity of community, practices, and beliefs. There are several issues that Christians encounter with postmodernism in general, more specifically postmodern ideas applied to Christianity. It usually is noticed in their interpretation of experiences and the language they use to communicate or convey their message. “We make our worlds by how we use our language.”<sup>111</sup> Postmodernists believe language is what prevents us from accessing the real world, they contend that language is the only means by which we may create an understanding of it.

Christian postmodernism can be accommodative for non-mature Christians, seekers, and all who are looking for a way to associate culture and religion without Christ at the center. Christian postmodernism seeks to integrate postmodern thought and philosophy with Christian theology and practice. It is a response to the challenges of postmodernism to traditional Christian beliefs and practices. It shares some key features with postmodernism more broadly, such as an emphasis on the importance of context, an awareness of the limitations of language and discourse, and a critique of power structures that oppress marginalized groups. However Christian postmodernism also seeks to maintain a commitment to the central doctrines of Christianity, such as the belief in God, the divinity of Christ, and the authority of scripture.

Some proponents of Christian postmodernism argue that traditional Christian theology and practices have been shaped by modernist assumptions and methods and that these need to be re-evaluated and reinterpreted considering postmodern insights. Others argue that Christian postmodernism is a necessary corrective to the excesses of modernity, which have led to a fragmentation of society and a loss of meaning and

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<sup>111</sup> Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 54.

purpose. They may see Christian postmodernism as a way to reengage with the world and address contemporary challenges in a way that is faithful to the gospel. Scott Smith, in his book, *Truth and a New Kind of Christian*, argues that applying postmodern ideas to Christianity may compromise certain core doctrines, making it impossible for Christianity to survive as a linguistic approach.<sup>112</sup>

Christian postmodernism seeks to maintain a commitment to the central doctrines of Christianity, such as belief in God, the divinity of Christ, and the authority of Scripture. However, the emphasis of postmodern theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and Kallenberg on language and interpretation may compromise certain core Christian doctrines. Here are some Christian values at stake with postmodernism practices and ideas:

### ***3.3.1 The concept of divine revelation***

The concept of divine revelation is hard to grasp for postmodernism for they do not acknowledge that truth is knowable and objective. According to postmodernism, the way a text is used within a particular community largely determines its meaning. Christians can therefore create a biblical text into what it is for them by how they use it within their communities, even though they may not be aware of the intended meaning the biblical authors had in mind. This implies that Christians interpret and apply scriptures positively, but it also implies that there are little to no chances for divine revelation. This worldview affects Christians' conception of God. Traditionally, Christians held that God reveals himself to us through the Bible and in the person of Jesus and that His existence and nature are unaffected by the words or ideas we use to describe him. However, the postmodern's worldview holds that humans are unable to

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<sup>112</sup> R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2005), 143.

know reality as it truly is. According to the norms of language, Christians must in some sense construct their God. The result of such a thing is idolatry.

### ***3.3.2 The Divinity of Jesus: His Crucifixion and Resurrection***

The Christian postmodernist view challenges the historicity of the crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>113</sup> This view assumes that there is no objective language that we can know, so we cannot know these events (Crucifixion and Resurrection) as they were. According to Christian postmodernism, when Christians claim that Jesus rose from the dead, they are essentially saying that this is what they believe or what their community believes. Postmodernism suggests that the crucifixion and resurrection are constructed events by how Christians talk about them within their communities. Of course, this is contrary to the Scriptures. 1 Peter 3:18 ‘For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.’ Paul declares that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, our preaching is useless... (1 Corinthians 15)

This view is problematic for Christians who believe that the resurrection and atonement are historical events that happened. Scott Smith argues that the power of language cannot bring about the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>114</sup> While Jesus had the power to bring the dead back to life, this was due to his authority and power, not simply his language use. The resurrection cannot, therefore, be the result of constructed language, as postmodernists assert. Hebrews 9:22 ‘In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.’ The author of Hebrews underlines, blood must be shed to atone for sins, hence the forgiveness of sins cannot also be a power of language. For genuine or orthodox Christianity, the

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<sup>113</sup> Smith, *Truth*, 147.

<sup>114</sup> Smith, *Truth*, 147.

resurrection of Jesus, and atonement of Jesus are objective and independent of human language and interpretation. They hold true regardless of how they are talked about or perceived. If they are only constructions, Christians would be able to determine whether or not their assertions are true simply by the way they use language. The result of this reasoning would suggest that truth becomes a subjective creation, dependent on the beliefs and practices of individuals or communities. This is incompatible with the idea of objective reality. Our faith is therefore futile if we are to believe in the resurrection of Jesus following our perception or any sort of language.

### ***3.3.3 The Doctrine of Justification***

John Calvin, the great Reformer described Justification this way: “We simply interpret justification, as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as if we were righteous; and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.”<sup>115</sup> Romans 5:1 ‘Therefore since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Justification refers to the act of God declaring someone righteous. In this act of Justification, God pardons and removes the guilt and consequences of sin from the believer. It is the recognition that the believer is no longer held accountable for their past wrongdoing. Francis Schaeffer goes more in-depth, saying:

When I truly accept Christ as my savior, the Bible says God declares me justified at once. God, as the church, judicially declares the guilt gone, upon the basis of the substitutionary work of Christ. It is not that God overlooks the sin. He is holy, and because he is holy, all sin results in true guilt. But when I accept Christ as my savior, my sin has been punished, in Christ: in history, space, and time, upon the cross. And God declares me justified as far as guilt is concerned. It is as though I had never sinned. On the cross, Jesus took all of our punishment, which means there is no punishment left for us to bear, either in this life, or hereafter. Because Christ is divine his death had infinite

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<sup>115</sup> John Calvin, “Institutes of the Christian Religion, Trans. Henry Beveridge, Book 3, Chapter 11,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2 1997): 38.

value--value enough, in substitutionary fashion, to cover all of the individual sin and all the guilt of all those who will ever come to him.<sup>116</sup>

Justification is the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. It means that when a person is justified, they are regarded as having the righteousness of Jesus Christ attributed or credited to them. It is not their righteousness but the righteousness of Christ that is accounted to them by faith. This is a foundational belief in the Christian faith.

Even with this understanding of the doctrine of Justification, Christian postmodernists require that justification be explained in terms of language and behavior, where ‘appropriate’ behaviors serve as demonstrations of a person’s justification before God.<sup>117</sup> We know that behaviors alone are not sufficient to determine a person’s justification before God. What they mean by behaviors are religious activities that are common to Christians. However, understanding the motives behind any behavior is crucial for grasping the true meaning behind their behavior. “Behavior may be a good indication of what someone meant... but the meaning is a matter of what someone had in mind when that person did some action.”<sup>118</sup> The meaning goes beyond behavior and is rooted in the intentions of the individual. Tony Jones, the National Director of the emergent church, discusses justification as an ongoing process.<sup>119</sup> Scriptures explicitly teach that justification is an action that takes place at a specific point in time. Justification takes place when a person places their faith in Christ Jesus. Romans 3:21-26:

But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in[h] Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at present, to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

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<sup>116</sup> Francis August Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House, 1971), 73.

<sup>117</sup> Smith, *Truth*, 149.

<sup>118</sup> Smith, *Truth*, 149.

<sup>119</sup> Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Creating Holistic Connections, Cultivating Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 133.



Justification, therefore, is not a process, but a one-time event, and irrevocable.

### **3.3.4 *The doctrine of sanctification***

Sanctification is God's will for us. (1 Thessalonians 4:3); John 17:16-17 'They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.' All believers enter this state when they are born of God.

The goal of sanctification is to develop a character that is more like Jesus, which should show itself in certain behaviors. This is consistent with the ethical viewpoint of virtue ethics, which places more emphasis on developing virtuous character than merely following laws and principles. 'But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.' (2 Peter 3:18). In the process of Sanctification, we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord to be more like him. Sin has no mastery over us anymore. However, the Christian postmodernist's view of sanctification is a believer's character or virtue, as well as their position before God, is thought to of as constructions that arise from how Christians use language. How Christians speak and act in their communities has an immediate impact on their understanding and ability to fulfill these criteria. They also point out the fact that language is limited to conveying the full depth and meaning of the Christian faith to outsiders. Christian postmodernists, especially Hauerwas and Kallenberg, propose that Christians should focus on exemplifying the character of Jesus through their lives, recognizing that actions and lived experiences can often communicate more effectively than words alone, especially when there are linguistic and cultural barriers at play.<sup>120</sup> In that same line, Stanley Hauerwas explains this about the church:

... in which people are faithful; to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God... this church [the confessing one] knows that its most credible form of

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<sup>120</sup> Smith, *Truth*, 151.

witness (and the most effective thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith.<sup>121</sup>

Christians witness by demonstrating the truthfulness of their story and their recognition of the discrete and particular character of different Christian communities' languages. The Christian postmodernists have a limited understanding of the importance of Christian witness; they refute the apologetical arguments on presenting the truth of the Gospel to the unbelievers.

In summary, the Christian postmodernists that we explored in this section oppose the fact that Knowledge is possible and that it can be objective. We understand that grounding the core beliefs of Christianity on language and behaviors will lead to another religion and another God who is not the God of the Bible.

### ***3.4 Positive and Negative Contributions of Postmodernism in Christianity***

While Christianity and postmodernism often appear to be at odds with each other due to their different philosophical groundworks, there are points of agreement where their paths intersect. Here are some key points of agreement between Christianity and postmodernism:

#### ***3.4.1. Positive contributions***

Bill Kynes notes three positive contributions of postmodernism<sup>122</sup>

- Christianity aligns with the postmodern critique of modernism's arrogance, which has elevated reason and science for at least two centuries. They both criticize

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<sup>121</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 46–47.

<sup>122</sup> Bill Kynes, "Postmodernism: A Primer for Pastors," in *The Ministerial Forum*, vol. 1, 1997, 14–22.

modernism and its assertions of absolute truth, infallible reason, and the potential for fully realizing narratives.

- Christianity agrees with postmodernism in acknowledging the importance of communities in our knowing. Christianity and postmodernism recognize the role of power in shaping human relationships and social structures.
- Christianity agrees with Postmodernism in asserting that universal claims to truth can be used to oppress and exclude others. They critique power structures and advocate for marginalized voices to be heard and valued.

Missiologist, Rosemary M. Dowsett, has also noted how postmodernism has served some good purposes<sup>123</sup>

- It has drawn attention to some Christian weaknesses. For example, the deconstruction debate has (positively) contributed to the rightful growing unwillingness to regard scientific explanations as either wholly adequate or exclusively credible, or valuable.
- It has helped dismantle the pretensions of rationalism.
- Deconstructionism forces us to a fresh look at what we mean by the inspiration and authority and objectivity of Scripture, and at the role of the interpreter, and to face some Reformation ambiguities.

### ***3.4.2. Negatives Contributions***

We have extensively shared the effects (mostly negative) of postmodernism on Christian beliefs; here are some other effects observed with postmodernism:

- The postmodern understanding of truth is viewed as relative, with no absolutes.

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<sup>123</sup> Mel Loucks, "Postmodernism: An Evangelical Appraisal", PT103: Evangelical Perspectives on Postmodern Theology (class lecture, International Theological Seminary, West Covina, CA, May 17, 2023)

- The lack of confidence in human language reliability to communicate meaning and truth. If words cannot do any more than refer to other words, there is no hope for real communication.
- The reduction of truth to interpretation is ultimately meaningless.
- Postmodernism in all of its expressions, gives us little to no hope of living purposeful lives or looking to a certain and glorious future. If there is no objective truth, then anything is permitted.

### ***3. 5 The problem of interpretation of Scripture with Postmodernism.***

The problem of interpretation of Scripture is one of the greatest importance in the subject of discipleship. Without a proper interpretation of the Scriptures, our understanding of God will be distorted, and with it, the core values of Christianity. To understand where the problem lies when it comes to postmodernism, we are to start with the view that previous eras held concerning the Bible.

Premodernism was characterized by a belief in God, the Bible, and truth as revealed. Premodern theologians shared a common understanding that scripture could be understood through the study of the Word of God. With the rise of reason and logic in modernism, rationalism replaced the miracles of the Bible, replacing them with natural explanations of truth. Modernists believed truths can be discovered through rational and empirical means. Kevin Vanhoozer affirms, “While modern historical critics may not view the authors of the Bible as inspired, the original meaning remains the object of interpretation for them as well.”<sup>124</sup> Both premodern and modern theologians aimed to recover the meaning of the text. With the coming of postmodernism, the truth was not seen as something that can be found nor discovered as we have seen above. Each

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<sup>124</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 47.

interpreter of scripture has their truth and defines it according to his values and understanding. We then hear the saying, 'My truth, your truth.' Unfortunately, Truth becomes relative. D.A. Carson states this well: "Postmodernism is an outlook that depends not a little on what are perceived to be the fundamental limitations on the power of interpretation: that is, since interpretation can never be more than my interpretation or our interpretation, no purely objective stance is possible."<sup>125</sup> Postmodernism ushers in a world devoid of absolutes, where right is wrong and vice versa. Its views on ethics are grounded in the bible, but they are culturally determined. Gene Veith, author, and scholar suggests two guiding principles to postmodernist ethics: the principle of tolerance, which can be understood as the willingness to compromise for a greater ideal, which is morally wrong, and the principle of choice which is best understood by permissible actions are based on choice.<sup>126</sup> Truth is abandoned on behalf of perception, culture, and community.

When it comes to hermeneutics, this way of thinking does not render justice to the text that we read. The principle of interpretation of scriptures has three components which are the author, the text, and the reader. Premodern and modern interpreters somehow remain faithful to the intent of the author and thus interpret the text based on the author's intentions in the text. Unlike them, postmodern interpreters reject the intent of the author and make the text say what the author did not intend to say. Their interpretation focuses on the reader creating the meaning of the text, not the author's intention. Vanhoozer explains: "Postmodernity is the triumph of situatedness- in race, gender, class—over detached objectivity... Postmoderns typically think of interpretation as a political act, a means of colonizing and capturing texts and whole fields of

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<sup>125</sup> Donald A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 57.

<sup>126</sup> Porteous, "A Christian View of Postmodernism and Its Roots," 13–14.

discourse.”<sup>127</sup> It is all about subjective interpretation, postmodern theologians use the bible to fit their context.

With this in mind, we understand the reason behind the rejection of metanarratives, the rejection of absolute truth, and the rejection of reality; the natural consequence of postmodern hermeneutics is pluralism, everything goes. Postmodern theologians use the Bible to affirm their situation or cause.<sup>128</sup> It poses a problem not only for Christianity but particularly for discipleship.

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<sup>127</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “LOST IN INTERPRETATION? TRUTH, SCRIPTURE, AND HERMENEUTICS1,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 1 (2005): 92.

<sup>128</sup> Douglas Brown, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Postmodernism,” n.d.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD**

The command every believer, by virtue of being a disciple, receives, is to go and make disciples. The command was given to men and women who responded to the call to discipleship. In the Old, as well as the New Testament, we have seen models of discipleship from which we can draw great insights; but for our discussion in this chapter, we want to focus on Jesus' method of discipleship.

Discipleship, as we learned in a previous chapter, implies a process, a journey, and the idea of the relationship between the apprentice and his/her master. Therefore, Christian discipleship is necessarily Christ-centered living. We are aware of the differences in the culture and context of Jesus's days. Nevertheless, our focus will be on the learned principles and apply them to the culture of contemporary times. In the current context, the emergence of a postmodern culture is one of a kind, it challenges Christianity at so many levels and poses a problem to discipleship.

To engage in discipleship during these postmodern times is to stand against the wind. As we have learned from the beginning, postmodernism challenges the core values of Christianity. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ gave us the command to go and make disciples of nations because the theme is at the very heart of God. The command should be fulfilled no matter the times and seasons. The statement should not be taken as God enforcing his word upon his people, but as invitational for it carries great benefits for whoever engages in it. We understand that the truth of God does not immerge from

culture, nor anything else, it is revealed to us by the power of the Holy Spirit, and we ought to receive and abide by this truth if we indeed have received Christ in our hearts.

#### ***4.1. Current State of Discipleship in the Church***

At the beginning of the year 2022, the Barna Group published some statistics about discipleship. The results were quite surprising. Just 28% of Christians are actively involved in the discipleship community, while 39% are not engaged in discipleship, and only 5% of Christians are discipling other Christians.<sup>1</sup> Undergirding these results, some cultural assumptions were taken into consideration to explain the choice of many who did not engage in Christian discipleship.

A study from Lifeway Research showed that while 78% of churchgoers say they've developed significant relationships with people at church, only 48% say they intentionally spend time with other believers to help them grow in their faith. Churchgoers seem to be meeting regularly but not spiritually developing as a group.<sup>2</sup> This resulted in “quantitative” rather than “qualitative” growth in the church.

#### ***4.2. How Did We Get Here?***

In the beginning, God created the universe inherently good; he created man and woman in his image and likeness. Ephesians 2:10 says, ‘We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.’ We have been created to be in a relationship with God (the triune God) in a vertical relationship and with other members of the creation in a horizontal relationship, and good

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<sup>1</sup> “Two in Five Christians Are Not Engaged in Discipleship,” Barna Group, accessed May 27, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/research/christians-discipleship-community/>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Cross, “Community Is Not Discipleship - Lifeway Research,” February 25, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/02/25/community-is-not-discipleship/>,



stewards of whatsoever has been entrusted to us. However, in that good environment, something went wrong.

The unique gifts that God gave to humans have been used by them to flee from him. Our world is now incredibly chaotic because we have become self-centered or egocentric and forget about others. We have lost sight of the purpose for our creation, and as a result, we exclude others, are cruel, and believe we are superior to everyone else. Joshua Chatraw in his book, “Telling a Better Story” stresses that “Facing human failure is essential for seeing the message of Christianity as good news.”<sup>3</sup> God provided a way out by coming to earth in the form of a man to save humanity. This man is Jesus, the central figure of the Christian narrative. He came into the world, offered forgiveness of sins, and gave the grace to heal the wounded and make the rebels into sons and daughters of God. The culmination of God’s victory over death and the renewal of the world is the resurrection of Jesus, which frees us to rest in God’s unending love. Many received the gospel message through their commitment to the Lord, and were plugged into a church, especially small groups. Unfortunately, the small group meeting turned out to be a time of refreshments, relaxation and accolades, but no real learning took place that strengthened or deepened the process of discipleship. This has been the case for many Christians in church. As such, the essential question is about how to engage in proper discipleship within the life of the church in our postmodern world.

It usually is common to have discipleship classes in many of our churches, however, most of the participants do not end up making disciples. If we engage in discipleship, it is to be able to reproduce other disciples; that is the model of Jesus; that is the reason we have a faith like Christianity today.

Jesus said “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey

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<sup>3</sup> Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 62.

everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20, NIV). The church's mission is holistic: to make disciples, baptize, and teach the disciples to obey. Sadly, we have converts who are baptized, and yet, they lack essential teachings. I believe this is one reason we are witnessing the “falling out” of many churchgoers. In a world where the center is unsettled, we are called to teach the centrality of the truth of God to the new converts, thereby discipling them, but also to remind those within the church the same truth they might have forgotten.

There is still much that is lacking within the process of true biblical discipleship. Among the central factors in some churches, is the lack of intentional and sustained thinking through the process of discipleship. After conversion, the converts don't transition into becoming disciples. because the “discipling aspect” is often left out or overlooked. In places where the thought process went a little bit further, discipleship was privatized and became about building up individual self-confidence in Christ through self-examination. Relatively, little thought is given to relationships; the social dynamics of forgiving one another, bearing with one another, and Christian virtues being shaped through a consciousness of the cross in the context of fellow believers. What it means to be good to others, especially those of the house of faith, touching the good of the city and the good of a broken world all around us, thereby letting our light shine before others. All of this assumes that a level of biblical and theological content would saturate and navigate our discipleship journey.

#### ***4.3. Dealing with Cultural Assumptions***

In the past, much of the background of Western culture was anchored to Christianity. Therefore, the very idea that there are moral absolutes and that the Bible is a trustworthy book, was not up for debate. Even People who seldom went to church or had a nominal commitment to Christ had a better understanding of God that is missing today

even. Some of the assumptions that we have today are keeping us from engaging faithfully in discipleship and becoming like Christ. This shows us that culture is an important component in our relationship with the Master because it impacts our way of life. While culture is to be taken into consideration, we also believe that it does not have total determinacy over our belief in God. That is the reason why in dealing with our cultural assumptions, we want to help people think from a biblical and theological perspective.

#### ***4.3.1. I don't need God or religion (Secularism)***

James K. A. Smith, in his book “How (Not) to Be Secular,” refers to what Charles Taylor describes as secular, “a situation of fundamental contestability when it comes to belief, a sense that rival stories are always at the door offering a very different account of the world.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore the importance of religious beliefs and activities is frequently minimized in secular societies. This results in a reorienting of people understanding along with undervaluing of the process of making disciples of Jesus Christ. Inevitably, they would be less societal acceptance or encouragement for practicing discipleship when religious beliefs are viewed as a private matter or personal choice. Religious beliefs are pushed out of the public institutions, that is, “*privatized*” as Charles Taylor would say, so that people could engage in politics without ever encountering God.<sup>5</sup>

Moral values and ethics are distorted, but rather than looking to God for direction, people “have constructed webs of meaning that provide almost all the significance they need.”<sup>6</sup> James K. A. Smith further explains that non-religious longings, goals, and quests for significance are driving many today. People are content with the right relationships

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<sup>4</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, First Edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, vii.

and experiences and will confidently tell you so.<sup>7</sup> Even while having all that they need, they acknowledge that something is missing. Most people would not think this is innate, the desire for God in us; rather, they will probably want to fill the gap with new goals, new success, more money, friends, etc.... they work more to achieve all these temporal benefits in vain while missing out what is eternal and lasting and beyond this world.

#### **4.3.2 *Many parts (Syncretism/Spiritualism)***

Faith has become very tenuous. Even Christians today falter, due to a plethora of choices provided by religious alternatives promoted by bright and admirable individuals. Many admit that due to the constant strain of the skeptical currents with which they live, they are often inner doubts that can be taxing beyond measure. In addition, when New Age practices become part of worship services, when angels and pastors are worshipped, and there is an over-saturation of technology in the church along with syncretistic activities blurring the lines between truth and deception making it difficult to determine what is in harmony with and what is not in line with biblical teachings. This decline in discernment can prevent disciples from correctly comprehending and putting into practice the biblically based principles of discipleship, which can result in confusion and spiritual stagnation.

In our postmodern condition, it seems wrong to believe that Jesus Christ is God and that Christianity is the exclusive bearer of ultimate Truth. Mark 9:24 has become the anthem for many Christians facing the challenge of faith, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’ Furthermore, Christian values are diluted because of the incorporation of elements from other religions or spiritual practices. Many doubts arise when believers are surrounded by other faiths. Paul Hiebert, the anthropologist stresses that postmodernism has restored our ability to discuss spiritual truths, allowing new

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, vii.

spiritualities to enter the world, ranging from environmental protection to social justice.<sup>8</sup> While this can provide an opportunity to strengthen one's faith, to lay out the reason for why we believe what we believe; but it can also be a place for struggle especially for those who have not been disciplined in their faith, and therefore might unknowingly give to practices that are contrary to scriptures. Lacking the proper discernment that comes from the life of discipleship, they welcome any movement that makes them feel spiritual forgetting the biblical dimension of authentic faith in God. David Brooks, New York Times columnist, and Yale professor, who will be best identified as a disciple in transition learning to understand Christ's call to follow him, described how much he has needed "persistence to faith through doubts...persistence in faith through suffering and anxiety...persistence in faith through struggle."<sup>9</sup> As Chatraw says, when belief or faith faces the pressures of unbelief, Christians, need help from other believers (Christians) to help them navigate during their times of doubt.

#### ***4.3.3. You have to be true to yourself (Individualism)***

There is a phrase that is trending in Christian circles: be true to yourself! As we flip the pages of our bible, we hardly see anything that supports this statement. Our true self is found in Christ alone. The call to be true only to yourself is the result of the postmodern culture. This idea promotes a subjective and relativistic view of truth and morality. It suggests that personal desires, preferences, and self-perception are the ultimate arbiters of truth and right conduct. "This morality constructed around nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, has famously been

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<sup>8</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 236.

<sup>9</sup> David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random, 2019), 251.

labeled *emotivism*.”<sup>10</sup> Moral judgments are irresistible in practice, even if one rejects the idea that morality exists independently of experience or sentiments.<sup>11</sup> Further, concerning identity, Chatraw says “... it is actually possible to look inside of ourselves and find our identity since culture is always cultivating our desires and telling us how we should feel about and respond to our impulses.”<sup>12</sup> The culture around us weighs upon us, most of the time, we become more obedient to that culture than anything else. Charles Taylor puts it this way: “No one acquires the language needed for self-definition on their own.”<sup>13</sup> God’s final authority on one’s life loses meaning; personal autonomy takes precedence over submission to God’s authority. Being true to yourself comes down to individualism and undermines the importance of accountability within the community. Such attitudes isolate individuals from necessary guidance and correction that can be helpful for their spiritual growth. The Bible teaches that the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? ((Jeremiah 17:9 NIV); also Proverbs 3:5-6 says trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. In a biblical perspective, it is not individuals who live individuated lives, but rather persons who live within the context of interdependence and interpersonal relationships.

#### ***4.3.4. The ultimate goal in life is to be happy. (Hedonism)***

“Happiness is a momentary feeling dependent on circumstances, but it can be undermined by considering our inevitable demise and loss of everything we hold dear.

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<sup>10</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,” 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 11–12, emphasis in original.

<sup>11</sup> Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 90.

<sup>12</sup> Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 27.

The challenge is to find joy and hope in life's changing circumstances."<sup>14</sup> People who view happiness as their ultimate objective may place more weight on immediate gratification and personal pleasure than other values and biblical teachings. The cultural assumption of happiness frequently encourages an externally centered, ephemeral understanding of happiness based on things like wealth, success, or material belongings. Of course, this understanding of happiness is not based on scriptures but on consumerism. C.S. Lewis lamented in the middle of the twentieth century that "a sense of sin is almost totally lacking, and that a moral register had been traded for a therapeutic rationalism."<sup>15</sup> Hiebert carries the thought of therapeutic rationalism little bit further by saying that "...Modern and Postmodern focus on earthly health—a shift from sin to sickness, from repentance to therapy. In postmodernity, the human problem is no longer sin, but sickness. Health not only offers freedom from disease but exuberant life full of tremendous vitality."<sup>16</sup> Society has determined that the solution for sin is not repentance and turning back to Jesus, but therapy. Therapy offers the satisfaction of emotional longings, vitality, liberation, and self-fulfillment.<sup>17</sup> Happiness as the ultimate goal may leave people unprepared to face difficulties with faith and resilience. In 1966, sociologist Philip Rieff composed a seminal work, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, in which he foresaw an age when the pursuit of feeling better will overshadow the quest for justice, forgiveness, or redemption. He asserts the main core value of society will be happiness, and thus the religious person, who was born to be saved will be overshadowed by the psychological person, who is born to be pleased.<sup>18</sup> Where the pursuit of happiness reigns

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<sup>14</sup> Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 107.

<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, "God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics" (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 95.

<sup>16</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 235.

<sup>17</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 235.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 25.

supreme and is undergirded by a hedonistic philosophy, the biblical call to holiness would often be dismissed.

#### ***4.4. Offering a Non-Modern Metanarrative***

In our previous chapter (chapter 2), we pointed out postmodernists' skepticism toward meta-narratives. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, metanarratives are totalizing stories or narratives attempting to explain everything within a particular framework, often claiming universal validity. Because of the oppressive character of meta-narratives, they should be rejected. While there is a strong measure of truth in this contention<sup>19</sup> as Millard Erickson said, Christianity offers a non-oppressive meta-narrative that has a thorough grasp of God's purpose for people, the meaning of life, dealing with the issue of sin, and the ultimate redemption and restoration through Jesus Christ, our Lord, and Savior. While the majority of Christians assume that Christianity is a metanarrative, some theologians, like Michael Horton, suggest that Christianity is not a metanarrative, it is based on a misunderstanding of what metanarratives mean. He writes that what Lyotard meant by metanarratives "is a certain way in which modernity has legitimized its absolutist discourse and originated or grounded it in autonomous reason; so, while it is a mega-story, it is not really a meta-narrative."<sup>20</sup> Merold Westphal notes that "in philosophical discourse, *meta* signifies a difference of level and not primarily of size,"<sup>21</sup> and Biblical faith, however, does not legitimize itself in this way. For him, Christianity is not a metanarrative, but a "mega narrative, a big story."<sup>22</sup> Horton goes on further in saying that "metanarratives give rise to ideologies, which claim the world's

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<sup>19</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise & Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2001), 33.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith*, 21 (New York: Fordham Univ Press, 2001), xiii-xv.

<sup>22</sup> Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology*, xiii-xiv.



allegiance even, if necessary, through violence.<sup>23</sup> While we understand what Horton and Westphal are saying, we still come to the conclusion that Christianity is a big story that expresses itself not in modern terms, without imposing an ideology or belief, but inviting people to a life of purpose, meaning, and hope.

Unlike many other metanarratives, Christianity emphasizes hope. God has shaped humanity to seek meaning and purpose in him. We are made in the image of God, but our longing for purpose is hindered by sin, leading to despair and futility. Chatraw stresses that “at the heart of Christian story is the claim that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has rescued us from sin and futility, giving our work eternal significance and fulfilling our longing for purpose. Moreover, in the person of Jesus Christ, God has given us a model of how we are to live with purpose and aim as the true and eternal goal.”<sup>24</sup> In this secular world, humans have purposed to enjoy life to the fullest; in doing so, they come to the realization that there are certain longings that cannot be fulfilled with the things or possessions they have accumulated. Not realizing it, they keep trying, thinking that the next car, a new baby, or perhaps a better job will bring about the perfection they seek. Sadly, they realize that after much effort and accomplishments, something vital is always missing. Regardless of the postmodern claims about the meaninglessness of life, human beings want to live more than anything else.

A non-metanarrative Christian story therefore would be a story of hope and redemption. Let me provide the outlines of such a narrative.

- Creation (Genesis 2)

At the beginning of everything, there was God, a loving and good Creator. He created the heavens and earth. He filled the earth with everything that was necessary for

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<sup>23</sup> Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 79.

living and productivity. He created Man (Adam) and Woman (Eve) in his image and likeness and placed them in the furnished garden called Eden. He blessed them and gave them the mandate to cultivate the garden and to be fruitful. God told the man not to eat the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve lived together in harmony, and in perfect relation with their creator.

- Fall (Genesis 3)

The serenity of the garden was shattered by the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve. They disobeyed the commandment of God and ate from the forbidden tree. This act of defiance introduced sin into the world and caused a separation between God and his creation; they (Adam and Eve) were cast out of the garden with a promise of a savior who will bring restoration to that broken relationship. As the number of people on earth grew, God, sent messengers, prophets, and wise men to reassure his people of his presence and great love, to teach them his way, and to reveal to them his salvation plan for humanity.

- Redemption and Restoration (The Gospels)

In the fullness of time, God sent his only Son on earth to save humankind. Jesus Christ came as a baby through the virgin birth of the Holy Spirit. He was fully man and fully God. He lived a sacrificial life of compassion, forgiveness, and love. He healed the sick, comforted the brokenhearted, and proclaimed the kingdom of God. Out of love for humankind, he paid the debt that he did not owe. He gave himself, to those who once shouted Hosanna to Him who came in the name of the Lord, to be crucified on a cross, taking upon himself the sins of the world. He died and rose again on the third day and ascended to heaven where He sits at the right hand of God the Father, he will come back again to judge the living and the dead. His death and resurrection provided a pathway for the salvation of humankind. Jesus Christ's sacrifice brought restoration and forgiveness to the relationship between God and humankind. Because of his great love for

humankind, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions (Ephesians 2:4). He saved humankind by grace through faith. Those who believed in him were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; they carried on his teachings by the power of the Holy Spirit, spreading the love of God on earth, and being compassionate and hopeful in the promises of God. To all those who received him, He gave them the power to become children of God. When Jesus comes back, those who believed in him, whether dead or living, would reign with him eternally.

The Christian story is not merely a collection of beliefs; it is a narrative that speaks to the deepest longings of the human heart. It tells of a loving creator who reaches out to his creation, offering redemption, restoration, and the hope of eternal life. It is a story of divine love that transcends time and space, inviting all who hear it to experience a profound transformation and participate in the unfolding of God's great plan for humanity. However, the modern narrative would assume that Christianity is founded on myths that cannot be proven, and postmodernists are skeptical about it altogether. In response to the modern critique, just because some beliefs cannot be scientifically proven, does not discard the truth of the claim. Science gained authority by people who came together and agreed on some assumptions and defined them as the foundation of science; as such, the foundational values of science, assumptions and axioms, science is always seen as presenting the pure facts. The historian Rodney Stark showed that "there are religious reasons why modern science emerged in Christian Europe and not in the sophisticated societies of China, ancient Greece, and the Islamic world."<sup>25</sup> The Christian story about the world provided assumptions that were vital to the rise of modern science. The Christian belief is that the universe was formed by a personal and sovereign Creator

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<sup>25</sup> Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 150–58.

who ordered the universe, which enables science to mature.<sup>26</sup> Science itself used Christian belief to establish some of its principles. This nullifies the fact that Christianity is just a collection of myths. Moreover, there are many other religions that have similar story of creation but lack hope.

#### ***4.5. Christian Discipleship as Personal Following and Living in Community***

##### ***4.5.1. Personal Following***

There are many layers to Christian discipleship, it is multi-dimensional (spiritual, ethical, and communal). Jesus impacted holistically the lives of those who followed him. Every single aspect of one's life was transformed. In this part, we will use the word "following" interchangeably with discipleship. Readings in the gospels, show us that in some instances, people followed Jesus in a strict meaning of the term, as in Mark 3:7 "But Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea. And a great multitude from Galilee followed Him, and from Judea", but others followed him as/to be his disciples as in John 1: 35-46 "When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?". Wilkins points out 2 ways disciples followed Jesus in the gospels: Physically and spiritually. "Some disciples, especially the 12, were to follow him around physically, which meant that they were joined with him in his earthly ministry of proclaiming the Kingdom, and which also meant that they were being trained for their ministry in the church after Jesus had ascended. But the figurative following was for all disciples, in which they would grow to

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<sup>26</sup> Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 152.

become like Jesus.”<sup>27</sup> We are in the figurative following today, for we do not see Jesus physically, but we follow in proclaiming the kingdom of God as did the twelve.

A personal following is a response to walking in obedience, submission to Jesus’ leadership, and commitment to the word of God. Here is the passage that describes the personal following:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self. (Lk 9:23-25 NIV)

The passage gives a description of dying to self and walking after the Lord. When we make the decision to follow, we do not belong to ourselves, but to the Lord. Bonhoeffer said, “only those who are obedient believe and only those who believe are obedient.”<sup>28</sup> The act of obedience goes hand in hand with the principle of faith. As God has placed before us life and death, he calls us to choose life so that we can live. This principle applies in discipleship, because the life Jesus is calling us to choose is the life of a disciple; a life that is centered on him. We choose this life by faith. We choose to make 180 degrees turn so that we leave behind all that we were so accustomed to, to cling to the newness that Christ gives. Bill Hull stresses that “We fundamentally give up the right to run our own life. In other words, you can follow your heart, your dreams, your gifts, your personality profile, and seek the right fit. But all that’s inferior to following Jesus.”<sup>29</sup> Following Jesus is greater than following our own desires, and it is a conscious decision that we make.

The personal following passage insists on self-denial. Often, we have seen people living an ascetic life, which does not amount to the self-denial Jesus is talking about. The nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Alexander McLaren, declared, “Any asceticism is a

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<sup>27</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 132.

<sup>28</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 63.

<sup>29</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 119.

great deal more to men's taste than abandoning self. They would rather stick hooks in their backs and do the swinging *poojah* than give up their sins and yield up their wills."<sup>30</sup> We say no to ourselves, to say yes to Christ. "The only righteous role of self-denial is to eliminate any obstacle that blocks saying yes to God. When my will conflicts with his will, self-denial makes following his will possible."<sup>31</sup> Of course, this is not an easy task, but that is part of following that is necessary. Because He did deny Himself, in order to bring glory to His Father, we are called to do the same. It is important to note that self-denial does not prevent us from acting. We live in a world that moves, and there are things to do. We do not remain passive in our relationship with God and our peers, we relinquish control, and we move as the Lord directs us to act. We pray to seek His face and direction; we plan and then act. We need balance in everything we do. A balanced attitude in our following will eventually lead us to discover our mission. We won't stay at the entrance of the promise land, expecting God to give us all the details of the journey that awaits us, but as we move forward, our heavenly Father progressively unveils the mission. It is our obedience in moving forward that will allow us to know the mission to which he has called us. Nevertheless, our mission starts by going and making disciples. A personal following that does not involve the going and the making is faulty. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20 NKJV)

In becoming like Jesus, Bill Hull identifies six points of transformation that are key points to a formative life of a disciple<sup>32</sup>:

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<sup>30</sup> "The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Expositor's Bible: Colossians and Philemon, by Alexander Maclaren.," accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37345/37345-h/37345-h.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 121.

<sup>32</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 130–51.

- Transformed mind: Believe what Jesus believed.

Our minds “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:2 NKJV)

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:5 NKJV)

- Transformed character: Lived the way Jesus lived.

Jesus’ character was steadfast and selfless. Matthew 4:1-10 He was tempted but did not sin. He demonstrated how to resist to the enemy and make him leave. Moreover, Jesus did not just worry about himself, but he also considered all of us who would follow him and experience temptation. He prepared the way for each one of us.

- Transformed relationships: Love as Jesus loved.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this, all will know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another.” John 13:34-35

Just as Jesus has shown us his love, we need to put into practice the love for one another. It is out of love that Jesus gave Himself on our behalf. We are called to love like him. One critique that usually comes against Christians is that we are unloving. Many factors can explain the so-called “unloving” attitude; however, we want to learn to love like our master.

- Transformed habits: Train as Jesus trained.

Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. Hebrews 5:8-9

The humanity of Jesus allowed him to learn as everybody else; the Bible tells us that he grew in stature and wisdom (Luke 2:41-52). The disciples of Jesus followed his pattern of life by doing just what he did while on earth. Jesus practiced prayer (Luke 6:2),

solitude (Mark 1:35), Fasting (Matthew 4:1-11), submission (John 5:18-37), humility (Philippians 2:5-8), obedience (Luke 22:41-42), sacrifice (Hebrews 10:9-10), fellowship (Luke 22:14), confession (Mark 8:31), worship (John 4:21-24). We are called to do the same. We should be careful about making these disciplines turn into laws. We ought to practice them so that we can spiritually grow. Richard Foster says that “spiritual disciplines are intended for our good, they are meant to bring the abundance of God into our lives”<sup>33</sup>

- Transformed service: minister as Jesus ministered.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45. Jesus went counter-culture by serving others. He washed the feet of his disciples, he accepted to be crucified. Today, many of us find this quite challenging, for it seems to put us in a lower position. Even though we claim to serve, we like the position of authority. We still have a lot to learn from our Master, which is why we are called to be disciples.

- Transformed influence: lead the way Jesus led.

Jesus’ influence was characterized by his qualities. He walked in humility, submission, and obedience. Even before death, he did not retreat. He chose to suffer for the salvation of the World. Such love is incomparable. “For to this, you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps.” 1 Peter 2:21 NKJV

The following living would be perfect if each one of us focuses on doing all that is written above, but there are still many of us believers who live a Christian consumerism life. In our churches today, according to Bill Hull, two philosophies are at war: the Jesus way and the consumer way. The Jesus way is what we described earlier as

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<sup>33</sup> Richard J Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978), 9.



the personal following, what it involves, and what it entails. The consumer way is the dominant culture of our postmodern world. It creates a consumer Christian and a consumer church. “The consumer Christian culture focuses on receiving benefits and getting into heaven... we cultivate artificial needs, create an environment of instant gratification, package the teaching of Scripture into neat formulas, and conduct worship centered on personal needs and taste.”<sup>34</sup> The consumer Christian thinks about the blessings of God and is never ready to be part of the suffering. The cross has no interest for them. They like fellowships and small groups with no intentional desire to learn from scriptures or purpose to grow; more of them, less of Jesus. The result is that we have untransformed believers. Eugene Peterson said it well: “The American Culture is stubbornly resistant to the way of Jesus.”<sup>35</sup> Jesus came to give us life, and to have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

#### ***4.5.2. Living in Community***

The idea of community is usually overshadowed by the personal following. We can be carried away by the one-and-one formation that we neglect the life outside the relationship we are having with the mentor or anyone else who is discipling us. In his book “The Opening of the Christian Mind,” David Gill said this:

We must have the community to support and correct our discipleship in the world. This seems so obvious, but our practice is so frequently individualistic. Christian discipleship is not for Lone Rangers (though in fairness, even the masked man had Tonto as his sidekick). We must resist the individualism of our culture and cultivate deep and strong relationships with others. The challenges we face are formidable; without community they become impossible.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 293.

<sup>35</sup> Eugene Peterson, “*The Right Thing in the Wrong Way*” (Lecture, Spiritual Formation Forum Conference, Los Angeles, CA, May 2004)

<sup>36</sup> David W. Gill, *The Opening of the Christian Mind: Taking Every Thought Captive to Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989), 135-36

The journey of life entails the ups and downs that we cannot manage all by ourselves, we need people around us to navigate through life. Many years ago, when I started my journey as a Christian, I worked with a colleague who became one of my best friends. She was a Christian, and every day of work was a biblical principle that was infused in me. She took me under her wings and taught me what she knew about God and life as a Christian in the midst of unbelievers. As I grew in wisdom, we sharpened one another, and after some time, introduced me to a sister who integrated the group. We were three of us, sharing the word, having the weekly time of prayer and devotion, and heated debates on Christian matters. As I reflect on this friendship, I realized that my friend disciplined me, moreover, her presence in my life was so beneficial. When she passed away, I felt like a part of me went with her. Praise God, she had introduced me to that friend earlier with whom we became very close. And the circle grew bigger and bigger. We are about 50 today, sharing devotionals, weekly prayer, and carrying burdens of one another. When one is mourning, we mourn and provide support and strength to the family. The celebration of one is our celebration. 1 Corinthians 12:26-28 “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that, miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.”

Without the community of believers, many of us would not have been able to carry on with the service to the Lord and to the Lord’s people. “The challenges we face are formidable; without community they become impossible.”<sup>37</sup> Personal following is best done in a community.

In his days, Jesus gathered around him those He called, they were many, from a crowd, he selected 120, from 120 to 70, from 70 to 12. He called each of them personally

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<sup>37</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 247.

and placed them in a community because discipleship best takes place in a community. The 12 who hung out with Jesus, attest to that principle. Jesus wanted to show that to be a disciple is to follow him, the master, but also to disciple one another. Pastor John MacArthur, in an interview, said discipleship is passing on truths. Jesus passed on spiritual truths to his disciples through the parables, the sermon on the mount, and miracles. Paul did the same with Timothy. In 1 Timothy 1:3-7, Paul urged Timothy to stand against false doctrines, to wisely chose his battle and to work for the advancement of the kingdom. Our goal in the personal following of Jesus is to learn from his word, living and passing the content of the word of God to someone else. Find somebody you know who knows more than you do, and learn from that person, then find somebody you know who knows less than you do, and you teach what you know. In doing so, everyone is engaged in the process of passing on divine truths. As people receive the truth, first comes understanding, then beliefs, then conviction, and then maturity to the point of affection. Because we do not see Jesus physically, we cling to his word, and we make one with it so that our conviction takes ground on the word. These divine truths would affect the life of a believer. The personal following boils down to the love of the word of God.

Genesis 1:26 starts with God making this statement: “Let us make mankind in our image and in our likeness....” this statement tells us that God was already living in community. We cannot be solo disciples. “Believers in Jesus Christ are not supposed to operate freelance, hoisting themselves to spiritual heights using only their spiritual bootstraps. The church (the local congregation most immediately but also the wider body of believers, including especially people in positions of spiritual leadership) is the community intended to shape and form the character, the self, of a developing Christian.”<sup>38</sup> The disciple holistically grows in the community, his/her life is deeply

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<sup>38</sup> White, *Postmodernism* 101, 75.

personal, and it engages choices, decisions, and convictions. However, the Christian life is not an individualistic life. The time comes in the life of a disciple when being alone would be hard to bear; a community helps you and stimulates your obedience. One disciple needs another, to help us carry our engagements, to be accountable, and to be burden bearers for one another. Colossians 3:12-13 says “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.” A disciple cannot practice meekness, longsuffering, or bearing with one another alone, this is set to be done in a community, and that is how we can grow in obedience. Jesus Christ exhorted his disciples to love one another. John 13:34-35 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this, all will know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another.” Our Lord knows it is not easy to live together, especially when coming from different parts of the world, but that is the perfect place to practice all the commandments that are being given to the disciples.

In and outside of our communities, we must live out our Christian ideals. The church is intended to be a gathering place for the community of followers of Jesus Christ; it is not intended to be a gathering place for only those who share our opinions. It also is not intended to be a club where individuals gather because they get along well. The purpose of the church is to provide a setting where we may all learn how to live as disciples of Christ. When Jesus instructs the disciples to love one another, the church is given the mission to be a testimony of God's love and carry out that purpose. “Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come,’ so now I say to you. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one

another. By this, all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:33-35 NIV)

#### ***4.6. Conclusion***

Christian discipleship in the postmodern world is not new discipleship. The principles of discipleship as Jesus showed the pathway are still available in the contemporary/postmodern world. One missing thing that makes a great difference between these two eras is the fact that we have assumed that the assumptions that were obvious in the modern era are still valid today. These assumptions should be removed, so that everything starts afresh for new believers. All the basic doctrines have to be explained clearly so that nothing is assumed. Christian discipleship is not for high-grade Christians, but for whoever has come to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. The church is therefore invited to think of discipleship not as a program, but as a lifelong journey; meaning, every aspect of the local church, from the teaching to the worship, from the Sunday school to the Bible study, should intentionally be formative.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This work aimed to explore biblical and theological facts around the theme of discipleship in the postmodern world and define strategies that will be helpful for Christian ministry in fulfilling the great commission. Acts 1:8 declares “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The mission endowed to us by the Lord is done by means of the Holy Spirit.

The book of Acts narrates how the apostles preached the Word of God to people and 3000 came to Christ. They repented from their sins, and they followed the Lord. The Bible declares, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the breaking of bread and to prayer...every day they continued to meet together in temple courts. They broke the bread in their homes and ate together with gladness and sincere hearts. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” Acts 2:42-47. This passage offers a description of the disciples’ living in the Apostolic age. They were living together and teaching the Word and knowing the culture of the day of the Apostles. The choice to follow Christ was not taken lightly because many died as martyrs. “To claim the name of Jesus as Savior meant that one would surely experience persecution for the sake of that name.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, Jesus’ teaching on counting the cost, not only meant the cost of what becoming a disciple meant but also the cost of what the life of discipleship might entail. In those days, one demonstrated his/her faith by dying in the name of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 325.

Discipleship was more than confessing the name of Jesus as Savior, but more of living out the life that is confessed.

Our culture is different from Jesus' days, the days of the apostles, and the early church; we rarely hear about people being put to death for the name of Jesus in the West, (which is often the case in some parts of the world) but the persecution we experience has much more to do with the battle of ideas. In the past, even though the vast majority did not follow God solely, there was general knowledge and acceptance of God being true and good. In our days, the lack of belief and conviction in various things ultimately culminates in denying God's existence. Consequently, churches struggle to be relevant in a culture that is pervasively irrational. Many individuals confess to not believing in anything. Gone are the days when the preaching of the fire of hell could scare people into believing; the same message would not move our generation, for their hearts are unstable, and always misled by diverting experiences. As such, many activities are therefore planned to keep believers happy and excited to attend church services. In doing so, pastors and leaders expect believers to love Jesus more and to commit to following him faithfully; sadly, that is not the case. In thinking about all that is happening in our churches and the efforts put in place to help people get to know Jesus, I came to realize that there are many essential things that are missing. First and foremost, the lack of proper teaching of the Word and the application of that eternal Word to the context of the contemporary culture in which we live today. Secondly, there is a lack of proper identification of the problem in our postmodern culture which is epistemological in nature. Because of the lack of continuity between the knowledge claims of the Scriptures and culture, many even within the church doubt the truth of the Bible.

The proposition of this thesis was to lay the groundwork for the possibility of discipleship in this postmodern world. Furthermore, it sought to describe the cultural context in which we find ourselves -the postmodern ethos, and how it impacts the beliefs

of many Christians. The challenges that postmodernity poses to Christianity, bring about the impossibility of passing on divine truths universally. Additionally, postmodern culture's rejection of Truth, stress on individual subjectivity, and emphasis on cultural relativism are factors that are impeding the growth of Christianity, making a renewed emphasis on the discipline of discipleship all the more necessary. Inasmuch as they stand as hindrances, they also give opportunities to believers to learn about the God they claim to serve and to be conscious of their choices. In practice, Christian beliefs must pass the test of truth, which shows that biblical Truth is revealed, knowable, authoritative, absolute, universal, exclusive, and unified.

We have also pointed out the fact that postmodernism, despite being at odds with Christianity, has positive contributions that can be exploited by Christianity in general and discipleship specifically. Among the positive contributions, is its emphasis on the principle of community. Discipleship is nurtured in communities.

On the other hand, we have defined discipleship by engaging the discussion on who is a disciple, and how did the relationship between a master and a disciple evolve in the Old and New Testaments. It has been demonstrated that discipleship was part of Judaic, as well as Hellenistic culture. The discipleship model of Jesus was different in the sense that it was not a theoretical discipline, but a holistic training of people. The disciple who received the call, responds in obedience by committing to follow and bear his/her cross daily. A disciple is a person who received Christ in his heart and submit to the teaching of the word of God. While in the process of discipleship, the life of a disciple is to be gradually transformed spiritually, ethically, and communally. The goal is to help people think theologically and biblically. The more we think theologically, the lesser, we give way into claims that are not in alignment with the truth of the Bible. The current culture is permissive, thereby leading to death, but the Bible instructs us to choose life so that we may not die (Deuteronomy 30:19). Moreover, it grounds the core beliefs of



Christianity on referential language and behaviors. Bill Hull stresses, “Discipleship flourishes when we present the gospel as a seamless journey of transformation that begins with the new life given by God and moves right along with the joy of following Christ every day.”<sup>2</sup>

Discipleship is a process of becoming like Jesus; it carries the sense of a journey. Faulty perceptions of discipleship expectations have led to some of the differences that we observe in Christian communities. Only those who are ready to be truly committed to Christ can engage in discipleship. Therefore, the disciple is the person who has counted the cost and has decided to follow. Discipleship encompasses both justification and sanctification.

In summary, we could say that a disciple is one who:

- Has come to Jesus for eternal life.
- Has claimed him as Savior and Lord.
- Has embarked upon following him.

This implies the process of becoming like Jesus Christ. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means living a fully human life in this world in union with him and growing in conformity to his image.

Charles Talbert in his book, Discipleship in Luke-Acts stresses, “Discipleship consists of being molded by the apostolic teaching, being empowered by an experience with the living God, and being a participant in a community of disciples. It involves both a way to walk and a mission to fulfill.”<sup>3</sup> This gives clear expectations of Jesus for his disciples.

We have also talked about how language has evolved, and postmodernists think there is not enough understanding of vocabulary to know or assert that the word of God is

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<sup>2</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 43.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Charles H. Talbert, "Discipleship in Luke and Acts" in *Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 62.

the Truth. However, objective truth is known by means independent of culture whether postmodern or post-Christian. Millard Erickson describes it this way:

“The objective or correspondence type of truth does not find its objectivity simply in a language in which the meaning is built up through a free play of words. Rather this truth is rooted in or based on a rationality that exists prior to and independent of any human individual’s discovery or recognition of it. God speaks, and what he says comes to pass. Indeed, to the extent that knowledge is the discovery of the way the world is, it is the discovery of the structure God has placed within it, for he has created all that is, and just as it is.”<sup>4</sup>

As we have progressed in our work, we have come to certain conclusions:

- Concerning postmodernism:

It is an ethos that is constantly evolving and blending into today’s culture. For the most part, it stands in the way of Christianity by advocating for values and beliefs that are contrary to our traditional faith. It considers the Christian story as oppressive and totalitarian. It manifests itself in the tenets of progressive and liberal Christianity where it is often believed that Jesus is not the only way to salvation and rejects the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

- Concerning the biblical discipleship

Despite all the cultural assumptions that could stand in the way of discipleship, churches should intentionally think of every aspect of the church as formative with the center of life in Jesus Christ. Christians should deconstruct the old ways of doing discipleship and engage the following of the Master in Christian life. Just as the parallel can be seen between Acts 13 and 17 about the audience, and the common shared background knowledge, Christian communities should identify their audience, and assess their knowledge of the different doctrines that the Bible teaches. An intentional passing on of divine truths should be considered. Nothing should be assumed.

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<sup>4</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Postmodern World: Discerning the Times and the Spirit of Our Age* (Illinois: Crossway, 2002), 63.

Engaging in the process and work of discipleship has made me realize that I had unnoticed misconceptions. However, due to researching and documenting this thesis, there is clarity and understanding in areas of discipleship that were completely new to me. It also helped me realize the programmatic discipleship structures within churches that were not helping believers to become disciples of Jesus Christ. From a positive standpoint, postmodern thinking helped me to deconstruct the preexisting structure and thought patterns and reconstruct discipleship with Christ in the center.

Postmodern thought also helped me understand discipleship as a narrative journey, where my identity is reoriented and remade by the Master who calls me to be his disciple. However, postmodernism with the positive elements that I just mentioned, still lacks the central core of the foundational truth that we find in Scripture. Truth that is eternal and more importantly truth that is not merely propositional, but ultimately personal. It is found in Him who is the consummate embodiment of all truth, Christ, himself.

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